CORONET

Author of SILVER WOOD

DEIRDRE ROWAN

A haunting story set in a house of shadows and dark memories

Dragon's Mount

19851 6

DRAGON'S MOUNT

Footsteps, muffled sound of the door shutting, a locking click. Then silence deep as the blackness.

Giving way completely, Jill lost her awareness for a time, screaming till her brain was full of blinding red, screaming till her throat felt bloody, till her mind recognized the frantic cries as her own, cries that ebbed in hopeless exhaustion.

Jill slumped against the panel, heart pounding, head throbbing. Horrible, more horrible than torture, to end like this, locked away where no one would ever find her!

**Also by the same author,
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Silverwood

Dragon's Mount

Deirdre Rowan

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For Scoop and Lynn, who took us on pilgrimage along the dragon trails

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ONE

As the train pulled into Glastonbury, Jill Underwood dropped her idle musing about the dour-seeming young man sharing her first-class compartment; she concluded that his longish black hair, though clean and combed, was the result of forgetfulness rather than fashion, then she gazed out the window in delighted awe.

A week's sightseeing in London had not accustomed her to the way people carried on everyday life in places so storied and ancient that they seemed magical to someone from Kansas City, Missouri.

It would have surprised Jill less to meet Anne Boleyn pacing through the Tower than girls in miniskirts and hot pants, or find traitors' heads grinning from London's bridges instead of rumbling cascades of cars, trucks, and buses. And it would have seemed more natural in the House of Commons to hear Cromwell thundering at Charles I than to dodge Members of Parliament in a perspiring rush for a quick cup of tea or tot of brandy.

With traditions often stretching back beyond Druidic times, every English village had its legend, every old house its ghost, but Jill still could not really believe that her train was stopping in Glastonbury or that secretaries plied electric typewriters where monks had illuminated manuscripts and pilgrims had trudged to see the living thorn sprung from Joseph's dead staff.

Woolworth's now sold things from all over the world where Celts had traded with Romans, and chemists dealt in antibiotics instead of philters for love and murder.

Not caring that her silent companion would chalk her down as a gaping tourist, Jill gazed entranced at cobbled streets and blazoned signs, the high gray wall enclosing

what must be the church, and the hills beyond, dominated by a strange, conelike rise topped by a ruin.

Was Dragon's Mount one of the peaks? Someone from there was suppose to meet her. Curiosity about the place where she would be working prodded her into rising before the train had quite stopped. Its final convulsive lurch sent her falling against her taciturn compartment mate, jarring the clipboard he had been writing on in fits and starts all the way from Waterloo Station in London.

Castles, hill rings, stately homes, Roman ruins, and steeples had slid past the window without rousing his notice. Between his jottings he perused a thick, spiral-bound notebook.

Jill's sudden weight sent his felt-tipped pen in a wild swerve. She caught for the opposite seat arm, scrambling up from her undignified perch on his knees.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she babbled. "I—I thought the train had stopped!"

Deliberately the young man put up his pen. "If you let the sluggish motion of things British—be they trains or people, fool you into thinking they're inert, you'll be in for many a jolt," he said.

Then he smiled. It was as startling and almost as unnerving as the last surge of the train. His face, tanned for an Englishman not of the laboring group, showed humorous crinkles about the eyes and longish mouth, while light danced in his formerly reserved eyes.

Unfurling rather gawky legs, he stood up and hauled down her nylon carryall. She cherished it for its many zippered pockets that held the hairbrush, shoes, books, and oddments she always forgot till her luggage was on its way out of the room.

She suspected that he would have performed the same courtesy for any woman, frail person, or old man, and felt grudging respect for his character, as well as some ruefulness.

Though no maddening beauty, Jill looked in mirrors and store windows often enough to know her dark, glossy hair gleamed red where the sun touched it, that she had

well-spaced eyes that changed from gray to amber to green, clear skin, and a pleasant shape.

She was not used to being ignored and was further annoyed at his sardonic twisting of her apology.

"Thanks," she said, reaching for her carryall. "I can manage."

He transferred the bag to the hand beyond her reach—unless she cared to half-embrace him. "Supposing the train jerked again? Let me stow this in a taxi. The monster's too heavy for you—or do you just look fragile?"

"I held a state record in track," Jill blurted and then wished she hadn't when he threw back his bony chin and laughed.

"Please don't *bellow!*" she hissed, hurrying to keep up with him as he left the compartment and strode across the platform. "And don't put my bag in a taxi! I'm being met!"

"By whom?" he asked, stopping and putting down the carryall.

Propriety warred with letting him know she wasn't an infinitesimal wave of the swelling tourist tide. This last urge was fortified with the hope that he might know something about the place where she was going.

"I have a job at Dragon's Mount."

He looked startled, then weary. "Not another!"

"Another what?"

"What indeed?" He studied her with intensity that brought blood rushing to her face, shook his head, and shrugged. "You'll have to tell me."

"I haven't the faintest notion of what you mean!"

"You aren't a cook," he said with a cool assurance that nettled her. "Nurse, maybe? Secretary? I suppose Paul will write his memoirs one day—as much as he wants to share with the world."

"I can't see that it's any of your business—and by the way, I *can* cook, quite creditably! You're familiar with the place?"

"Intimate, one might say. Though I haven't been there for some years."

She bit back questions. "Someone was supposed to meet me."

"Oh, they will!" he said drily. "*Facilis descensus,* you know! But getting out may be another story, or a horse of a different color, as you Americans picturesquely say."

"You're given to extravagant remarks yourself! What does descending into hell have to do with working at Dragon's Mount?"

He pursed his lips. "That depends on the work, I imagine."

"I'm to teach a little boy." Why add that she would be using operant-conditioning techniques and patterning to help a brain-damaged child? Realizing that he had tricked her neatly into explaining her job, she caught her breath in vexation. The man looked stormy, as if he had forgotten her.

"So he's pushing at Kelsey, the poor little devil!"

"You know them? The Regiers?"

His mouth pulled downward. "Dear lady, I have to confess, I am a Regier!" Before she could pull away, he caught her arm, collected her bag, and dragged her toward a bright yellow minibus that was just being angled blithely into the space reserved for taxis.

The man who claimed to be a Regier opened the door and boosted Jill up and in. With even less ceremony he tossed her carryall into the back.

"Hallo, Wayland!" he called to the gypsy-looking driver, who gazed at him in astonishment. "Here's the new recruit!"

"Johnny!" The driver reached across Jill to clasp the younger man's hand and squeeze it in burly, brown fingers that looked strong enough to bend iron. "Where did you drop from? Does your father know you're here?"

"Not unless he can read minds at long distance!"

"Well then, lad, hop in and ride with us!"

"Thanks, but I'll be along later. I have some things to do first."

Reluctantly the man called Wayland shut Jill's door. "But you'll come by sometime today and tell us all your news? Elin will be fair beside herself!"

"I'll be over after dinner, if not earlier," Johnny promised. He gave Jill a glance of inquiring appraisal, followed by a smile so infectious that she felt her lips curving in spite of her discomfiture.

"Good luck!" he said.

Then he turned abruptly and strode off. The dark man behind the wheel swung the bus forward as he blew a kiss at the approaching lady traffic warden.

"We're just on our way, love!" he called.

"And I'll mail the ticket to you, love!" she shouted after him.

"Will she?" asked Jill.

She herself was so painfully obedient to no-parking signs and other traffic admonitions that one exasperated friend had predicted that she would spend half her life hunting places to leave her car. This timorousness did not extend to Jill's other dealings, but she rather envied people like Wayland who flouted no-parking zones with happy impunity.

"Meg's a friend and my third cousin to boot," he said carelessly. He turned unreadable black eyes on Jill. "So you know our Johnny, or did you happen into him on the train?"

"We shared a compartment," Jill said. "Does he live at Dragon's Mount?"

The swarthy man's lips thinned. "No. In fact, he hasn't been back in—oh, it's over seven years." He clipped that subject off abruptly, too abruptly, and gave her an appraising side glance. "So you'll be poor little Kelsey's nurse?"

"More than that, I hope. I'll try to teach him."

Shaking his head, the man said glumly, "At least you won't be hard on the mite, I see that in your mouth and eyes, miss. So you'll do the child no harm." Under his breath he muttered, "Can't stand nought that isn't perfect, Paul Regier can't!"

Then with a definite change of subjects, the man called Wayland pointed out how these hills called the Mendips had once been an island surrounded by marshes, an island where delicious apples grew, so that it was called Avalla for the fruit and later Avalon.

"Isn't Camelot supposed to be somewhere about?" Jill asked, gazing at the strange patterns along the hill slopes, remnants of ancient earthworks that somehow suggested the paths of comets in their rhythmic undulations.

Brilliant green close up, in the distance grassy slopes hazed with blue so that the whole land seemed enchanted, a faerie place still haunted by Merlin and Morgan le Fay, a place where Arthur lay in charmed sleep.

"Oh, aye," said Wayland, nodding southeast. "Cadbury's yonder, and it's thought that was Arthur's city. Bunch of chappies did some digging there and at Silbury Hill—that's another famous spot you'd ought to see, miss. Saw lots of their work on the telly, my wife and me did. She was rare smitten with it all."

He laughed, strong muscles of his bronzed throat standing out, his curling black hair clustering about his large but well-proportioned head so that he looked like a sturdy Bacchus or some man-god out of classical antiquity. He wore leather trousers, the worse for stains, and a soft suede vest that hung open over a white, full-sleeved, open-throated shirt.

"Have you been long at Dragon's Mount?" Jill asked, increasingly curious and somewhat apprehensive.

"I was born there, miss. My father was blacksmith for old Sir George, and his father before him. My wife's father kept the park cattle till he died five years back. We've been at Dragon's Mount longer than the Regiers, bless you! For we're Celts and they're Norman, though they've wedded long ago into Saxon stock, as we have also done. And Paul Regier is married to my sister."

Jill blinked. She knew times had changed in England, but surely it wasn't common for the squire, lord of the manor, or whatever Paul Regier was, to marry his blacksmith's sister!

"But—Johnny?" asked Jill. "Is he your nephew?"

Wayland laughed as if at some private joke. "If he could hear that! No, miss, our proud Johnny was born of Regier's first marriage to a fine lady who ran off with a Frenchman a few years after hatching a cuckoo's egg in the Regier nest. That'll be Vivian. She's ten now."

"I don't think you should tell me—all this."

Wayland shrugged. "Better know and save blunders."

"Then Kelsey is your nephew?"

"Yes," said Wayland broodingly. "There hasn't been another child."

Jill felt it best to go back to impersonal ground.

"I've always thought Celts were Irish."

"The Irish Celts are. But so are the Welsh and Scots and some Cornishmen and Bretons, if they're of old blood. And you must remember that Saxons were Jutes, Saxons, and Angles when they came to our island. We crossed with them and the Danes later and even later with Normans, so it's a fine porridge, to be sure!"

"Fascinating!" laughed Jill. "You sound as mixed as the Americans!"

"My wife Elin, though, she's Pictish," said Wayland dreamily so that Jill wondered what the girl was like, to so affect this strange man. "Or as near it as makes no difference. What's Scot or Irish or Welsh count for in the long centuries? If you saw Elin dancing with our park cattle, you'd think she was back in the great rings of Crete, where I reckon folk of her blood ages ago played with the bulls."

"The Minotaur, you mean?"

Wayland snorted. "You may be sure that was some kind of priest wearing a bull's head! And even had he been a beast, my Elin could have beguiled him. She says she likes monsters. Why, she pranks with the master bull like he was a pony, him that's gored dozens of younger beasts in the herd and punishes any that don't troop before him of an evening when he reviews them just like a bloomin' general!"

"Not really!" protested Jill.

"You'll see, miss. I'm not filling you with tales that'll get you laughed at. You come out some day, and Elin will show you the cattle."

"I'd like to do that," said Jill. It would be nice to have a friend at Dragon's Mount, now that it certainly sounded mysterious. And how strange that she had shared a compartment with the long-absent son of the house!

Wayland turned off the main road, following a narrow hedge-bordered lane that led to a wrought-iron gate with dragons coiled on either side of it, stretching their coroneted heads across the top to almost meet at the center. As the bus approached, the gates swung open.

Jill gasped.

"Like magic?" grinned Wayland. "One of the gardener's lads worked it out. The boy has helped make those automatic doors on some new-fangled stores."

The gate closed again. Supermarket technology among dragons! Jill felt vaguely outraged as she scanned the drive bordered by giant limes, but decided it was useless to complain about anachronisms to anyone who was spared hopping in and out of vehicles to open ponderous gates!

The avenue of limes broadened, spread to border the approach to a huge rectangle of gray stone that was almost a castle. Flower beds circled the limes on either side, and beyond them stretched parkland of mowed velvety grass with many trees. Jill recognized copper beech, oak, chestnut, wych elm, and a cedar of Lebanon, proof that some Regier ancestor had gone on crusade.

The turreted house could have been forbidding, but wisteria trailed purple along one side and the waxy white blooms of a giant magnolia softened the other wall. A pair of dragons reared along the door and braced their claws against each other on the top of the frame. Weathered stone troughs along the house front held begonias and geraniums in brilliant reds, pinks, and purples.

In the center of the drive a fountain played amidst a small rock-garden vibrant with all shades of blue flowers from periwinkle to violets. The fountain was encased by an aged bronze engraving of dragons and swans.

Wayland drove to the entrance. "Here you are then." he said. "I'll take your bag in and find the master for you if he's about." His mouth quirked at the word *master*."

It was only as he climbed out of the bus and moved around to open her door that Jill saw he was lame. For him to limp seemed grievously wrong, because he was otherwise so strong and robust, but he moved quickly and ap-

parently was not hindered by his infirmity except in smoothness of gait.

"Your sister—Mrs. Regier, won't I meet her?" Jill asked.

"Soon enough," said Wayland. "You might as well know, miss! She doesn't favor your coming here. Given up on Kelsey, she has. Wants him left in peace with his nannie."

He gave Jill a hand down, swung back the seat, and pulled out her bag. Disconcerted to hear that the mistress of Dragon's Mount was against her employment, Jill lagged a bit behind Wayland. She straightened her skirt and gave her blown hair a tidying pat. Wayland opened the huge door and beckoned her in.

TWO

It was at first like stepping into a cave, but Wayland moved confidently. Jill followed him by sound rather than sight. Then he pushed through another door into a flood of light, dazzling after the darkness of the outer chamber.

Jill shut her eyes a moment. When she opened them, she saw that a hall led to a glass-paned door on the other side of the house through which she could see huge trees and velvety grass. She stood in a large, hexagonal room with two stairways leading up to a gallery. The ceiling of the room was a circular skylight which poured down golden rays that looked solid enough to grasp, striking brilliant greens, amethysts, wine reds, and sapphires from the arabesque scrolls of the Persian rug.

Ranging up the stairs on one hand were pictures of dancing, sports, family life, children at play, and all kinds of work from a painter at his easel to a midwife delivering a baby to a shepherd with his flock.

And there were the extensions of man—airplanes, ships, spacecraft, submarines; people living successfully in the Arctic, the Sahara, skyscrapers, farms, and the South Seas. It was a mosaic of man in conserving, creating, saving, useful, and joyous times.

Above the other banister, Goya's *Disasters of War* mixed with cartoons of avaricious merchants and ranting politicos, photos of slums and My Lai and color shots of contaminated waterways, oil-drenched birds, junked cars, and bumper-to-bumper traffic.

"Might call it propaganda?" queried Wayland with a raised eyebrow. "Paul told me to put you next to Kelsey, so we'll stow your bag first of all."

To Jill's relief Wayland stood back from the happy stairs to let her go up first. She would never use that other

way if she could help it! Near the end of the landing, she stopped in delight for a better look at a photo of an Eskimo father cradling his small child's head in his big hands while the mother nursed it. Such tenderness and cherishing showed in the parents' faces that Jill, often left cold by nativity scenes, was touched to the heart.

"They probably all have lice and stink of bear grease," said a voice above her.

Jill started, glancing up. "They look kind and beautiful, and they love each other!" she said hotly to the tall man at the top of the stairs.

"And you think that's the greatest of all possible goods?"

"I can't think of anything better!" Annoyed at the incredulous arching of his heavy brows, the quirk of his mouth, Jill challenged him, even though she was certain he must be Paul Regier, the master of this fantastic estate. "Can you?"

"Can I what?" he asked in his deep voice. Now he was truly smiling—laughing at her, Jill thought.

She colored but said obdurately, pointing to the photo, "Can you think of anything better than what they have, what they are?"

"Oh, my dear! That's romanticism of the wildest sort!"

He came along the railing and passed her, descending two steps beneath the one she stood on, so that they were on a level.

His eyes were so dark they were almost black. Except for height, thick hair that had a wing of white at the left temple, and something in the mouth, she saw nothing of Johnny in him. Where Johnny was sketched, this man was filled in, completely realized, solid.

He was overpowering. Jill wanted to look away but could not till his gaze relinquished hers.

"Now look what man can do," he adjured her. "Travel under the sea and above the clouds, even walk on the moon, save a doomed life, make beauty from clay or stone that will last thousands of years. Somewhere in the kaleidoscope of possibilities you must see something of more value than this tiny fragmented microcosm of family!"

Jill looked again at the happy wall, but though there was much she admired or thrilled to, nothing touched her like the young couple so absorbed in tending their baby. She didn't want to seem sentimental or parrot the repressive old doctrine of a woman's greatest happiness being in the home, but she was not going to let this man coerce or mock her into mumbled retreat.

Head high, she said deliberately, "I don't think there is anything more important—and I mean that for the man as well as the woman and child! Not that you must have a baby, necessarily, but to feel like that—to care, and be together—it's surely the best part of being human!"

"I can show you studies of lion families or wolves that look just as idyllic."

"Maybe a loving family is important because it's basic! I suppose you do eat and drink and sleep even though you share these needs and satisfactions with animals!"

He laughed, then sobering, took her hand, bowed, and kissed it lightly. But that brush of his lips played havoc with her personal chemistry, already disturbed by their clash.

"Good for you, beauty! Defend your convictions even if they spring from the heart, not the mind. Wayland, from that suitcase you are wisely resting on the stair, I assume this is Miss Underwood?"

"Miss Underwood it be," said Wayland, wasting none of his first chance to speak. "This is Mr. Paul Regier, who owns Dragon's Mount."

"Welcome," the tall man said. "The trip from London must not have been too bad. You look as fresh as a spring morning."

Jill had two preconceived ideas of English gentlemen over forty. One was of the hearty squire riding to hounds, and the other featured an austere, correct, vaguely paternalistic man with a ravishing accent, who spent his time in London clubs and board rooms, returning home occasionally to inquire about his wife's health and pat his children absent-mindedly on the head, his real enthusiasm reserved for handsome Irish setters or cricket matches.

This man shattered both concepts. As if he guessed that she needed time to recover from their meeting, Paul Regier inclined his head gravely in spite of the amused curve to his lips.

"When you've unpacked and caught your breath, won't you join me for tea?" He nodded across the hall. "My study's behind that large door. Just come right in."

"Thanks, I won't be long," said Jill.

She moved on up the stairs, cast a glance backward as she reached the gallery. Paul Regier stood in the spill of sunlight in the middle of the hall, arms clasped, very tall in his black clothes. He was looking at her.

Had he willed her to turn? Jill hurried down the gallery, but she thought she heard him laugh.

Wayland stopped. He retraced his steps and called down from the gallery. "Paul, young Johnny's back."

Silence. Then Paul's voice, tight and strained. "Johnny? My son?"

"No other."

"Where is he?"

"In Glastonbury. I offered him a ride, but he said he'd come along later."

"How—was he?"

"Same as ever, except a stone heavier and a bit taller." Wayland's tone held relish. "I'd say he's taller than you, Paul."

Unwilling to be an eavesdropper, Jill had hurried down the gallery.

"Here you are," called Wayland, checking her flight. There was a grim note in his voice. Had he been protecting his sister's rights, jolting Paul from his interest in Jill? If it was interest! "Miss, you—"

"What?"

He opened the first door in a wing branching off the main gallery, bundled the carryall inside, and hung it on a hook near a vast wardrobe with legs carved in gargoylelike figures, more of which were festooned along the top.

Wayland made a face at a demon who leered at him as he opened the wardrobe doors. "If you get tired of your

room, miss, you could pop in here for a change!" he joked. "There's a buzzer next to the door in case you need something."

"Thanks very much, Mr. . . ."

A hint of somberness left his brown face, and he flashed a grin. "Smith is my name, but call me Wayland. Good luck to you, miss!"

"Oh!" cried Jill in panic at being left abruptly in this strange house, another encounter with its master looming directly before her, and its mistress hostile! "Please . . . when will I get to meet your wife?"

"When you want to, miss." Wayland gave her an odd, weighing glance. "Go out the back door and straight past the walled garden, the orchards, and summer pavilion. There's an oak wood, and our cottage is on the other side near the castle park."

"I'll come first chance I get!"

A cool smile edged Wayland's lips, made his eyes unreadable. "We'll see, won't we? Maybe you'll find other things to do."

Before she could reply, he gave a slight nod and went out, closing the door. *Now what got into him?* Jill wondered, but a slashing memory of Paul Regier overrode the tiny nag of warning.

How did Johnny get on with such a forceful person? He himself was scarcely bland! But Paul had sounded shaken at the news of his son's return. And there was still Kelsey to meet, the child Johnny had spoken of so pityingly.

It had been a fluke, hearing of this job. Jill had spent three months in Europe studying sheltered workshops staffed by the mentally retarded. She was writing her master's thesis around this sort of hopeful program for those who would otherwise vegetate in institutions. Jill was convinced that the United States lagged far behind a number of other countries in its understanding of and provisions for this sizable portion of its people.

She remembered Sharon, her beautiful little sister, whose mind would never have been more than a child's. Sharon, four years younger than Jill, had been slow in

walking and talking, but was three before the family accepted what they had begun to dread.

Sharon had a frail heart and died from its deficiencies before she was twelve. The family never had to decide whether to put her in an institution or watch her grow into physical womanhood, middle age, and old age, always viewing the world through those calm, lovely, uncomprehending eyes.

The thought of what her beloved sister's fate would have been, had she lived, was the cause of Jill's drive to find happy, useful ways for the retarded to live.

She had theories, strengthened by what she had seen on this trip, but she had no way to implement her beliefs and was reluctant to take a junior staff position at a training school or custodial institution. She wanted a chance to study her notes, assimilate them, and write a thesis that might also serve as a guide in setting up living and work conditions for people like Sharon.

While she tackled this undertaking, she needed a job. When the operator of one of London's innovative private training schools had told her about the position at Dragon's Mount and offered to recommend her, Jill had considered it a perfect answer—intimate work with one patient, time for study and writing, and an opportunity for working holidays now and then to do more European observation.

But she had not foreseen Paul Regier. In fact, all the men of Dragon's Mount she had thus far met were disturbing originals—Wayland and Johnny, as well as the master. It was a good thing for her work that she wouldn't be seeing much of them. She hoped Mrs. Regier wouldn't be too difficult.

Unzippering the side pockets of her carryall, Jill put her pretty toiletries on the huge dresser and toothpaste and other such in the bath, which was almost as big as the bedroom, with an immense claw-legged tub standing on a tile dais.

As she hung up her clothes, Jill decided that she loved the fascinating hodgepodge of the room. It was furnished

with odd pieces of furniture, no two of which matched in either period or finish.

The large bedstead was pinnacled with bronze knobs, and a satin coverlet of old rose gleamed dully against thick, cheap Indian rugs with bright floral patterns on white. A round marble-inlaid, intricately carved Chinese table held the bedside lamp, a pouty-looking, torch-bearing, one-breasted Amazon who probably harked back to darkest Victorian days. The dresser had a triple mirror and was made of walnut with wood inlays of cedar and teak scrolls that wandered about the drawers and sides.

There was a funny-looking skeletal recliner which Jill tested and found surprisingly comfortable. It stood next to a small table in a bay window.

Turned to catch the window light was a handsome writing desk that opened to reveal many pigeonholes and small, handy drawers. A no-nonsense office chair with modern leather upholstery was pulled up to it and the work corner was completed by bookshelves and a capacious wastebasket.

A chaise lounge in faded emerald velvet faced the mantel. An electric log occupied the blackened fireplace. It should be a pleasant place to read or drowse. Jill stood at the window, pulling back the sun-streaked, rose satin draperies.

Charmed, she let her gaze travel across lawns and parkland. Far in the hazy, dreaming distance she saw what looked like Glastonbury Tor, a straight shaft on a gently rounded hill.

Avalon . . . Easy to believe!

The other window gave a panorama of one part of Dragon's Mount. That warm, red-brick enclosure must be the walled garden that Wayland had mentioned. Several men were pulling weeds from neat rows of cabbage while a girl picked berries from climbing briars along the wall.

Orchards stretched beyond the garden. Foreshortened next to them was an open, high-roofed, brick building which must be the summer pavilion, and high and dark and secret behind it rose a wood.

Peer as she might, Jill couldn't see beyond it. Those

wild cattle must be on the other side of the trees, Wayland's home and his girl-wife who played with the bulls.

Why had Wayland seemed to doubt that Jill would come to see them? Jill frowned slightly, then remembered that she was expected for tea.

A look in the mirror showed that her green-gray knit dress looked fresher than she had any right to expect. She brushed her hair till her scalp tingled and fastened it at the side with a barrette of sandalwood.

She wished she looked a bit older and experienced, but hers was not a sophisticated face. There was nothing she could do about it.

With resigned defiance, she put on natural-hued lipstick and left the room, glancing along the corridor, which made a right angle several doors down. She wanted to meet Kelsey, both wanted and feared to meet Mrs. Regier, but probably Paul Regier would prefer to introduce them. Anyway, she couldn't just start opening doors.

Once again she passed the smiling Eskimo family, the pictured montage of achievements and joys. Did anyone ever use those other stairs, the ones leading past war and pollution and vice?

Good and evil.

The spill of light in the hall and just beyond, the night-black passage. Such contrasts had to be deliberate, but Paul Regier had not struck Jill as a theatrical man.

What would he be like on closer acquaintance? Jill smoothed her dress, wondered if it were perhaps a fraction too tight, though it had seemed an exact fit before. Then, reminding herself that the most Regier could do was fire her, she gave a crisp rap on the big door.

"Who is it?" came his voice.

"Jill Underwood." *An it please your grace!*

The door opened. Paul Regier welcomed her in with a wave of his hand. "Tea's just come, Miss Underwood. Let's refresh ourselves, and then perhaps you'd enjoy a quick tour of the place. That will explain Dragon's Mount better than I can in words."

"I'd like that," she said, taking the chair he indicated. He was on the other side of a round table on which a tea

tray sat. "And of course I'm eager to meet Kelsey and Mrs. Regier."

Paul Regier shot her a quick look, then stared at the empty fireplace. It was a massive yet graceful construction, finished in onyx tile. The back of it, blackened by smoke, showed two dragons fighting, coils intertwined.

"There will be time for everything," he said. "But let's have our tea while it's hot! Will you pour?"

She could not admit that she had never poured hot tea before, so she proceeded cautiously, ready to catch the lid if it started to fall off its fragile Meissen pot.

"Cream and sugar?" she asked, remembering some British movie.

"That's milk, my dear, and yes, I will have a good splash of it, please. No sugar."

She handed him his tea, grateful that nothing had spilled, filled her own cup, and put in a lump of sugar.

"You'll get used to it," he smiled, dashing her hope that she had seemed completely at ease with the English ritual. Then he seemed to forget about her, sipping his tea and gazing into the fireplace with its two unburned logs on the grate and the dragons writhing above.

Though mystified and piqued at his preoccupation—why had he invited her if he didn't want to talk?—Jill took the chance to look about the room.

Long casement windows ran around two walls of the large, not-quite-square room. The western windows looked out on a garden, bright with formal beds shaped into mazes and geometrical forms, with a sun dial in a rockery. The northern windows showed a wide expanse of grassy park that merged into solid forest. Each view was perfect in its way, but utterly different.

Jill returned to inner space. A grand piano stood in one corner balanced by a huge desk at the other end of the room. Bookcases covered the walls, stretching to the ceiling, the top rows made accessible by several curving mahogany stairs covered with green and maroon leather on the treads.

A refectory table ran down one side of the room, covered with periodicals, books, notebooks, ledgers, and other

evidences of extensive study. A steel typewriter table with an old manual machine stood by a swivel chair that could turn from table to typewriter in one motion.

The room had many globes. There were three big ones held by wooden frames that let them revolve. Two of these seemed from olden times, with oddly elongated or curtailed land masses and sea monsters and winds. Smaller globes stood about on shelves or tables, and one hung from the ceiling by the desk, glowing with soft light.

On the mantel stood a clock inset with a map showing the time at different parts of the world. Above the fireplace was the only picture in the room, a reproduction that Jill recognized as an American primitive.

A poodlelike lion lay down by a lamb, other creatures sported among trees and flowers, and a child played with the animals. Paul's voice startled Jill.

"Yes, it's *The Peaceable Kingdom*. Raw, as one would expect from an untrained American, but I like it." Holding out his cup for more tea, Paul thanked Jill as she poured it. Then she stared at the fireplace. "Do you see anything there, Miss Underwood?"

"The logs, the grate, and the dragons."

He moved as if breaking a spell, and there was in his manner something of the hope that naming a devil may banish it. "I suppose it takes fire. Sometimes I seem to see a great fiery crab form out of the blaze and move toward me. Its pincers—" He grimaced and laughed harshly. "We all have our delusions!" Swinging his gaze full on Jill, he challenged, "What's yours?"

Was he slightly mad? Quelling her alarm with controlled effort, Jill smiled and took her time in answering. "If I knew it was a delusion, it wouldn't be one, would it? A delusion can only be when one believes an error."

"Save us, a theologian!" The master of this house studied her with raised eyebrows and mocking lips. "Let's be concrete then. What do you think can be accomplished with a child like—" He broke off; was it that he couldn't say a *child like mine?* "What do you hope to do with Kelsey?"

"I haven't met him, and it would take a while to even guess."

Sorry for this man, yet intimidated by him and determined not to show it, Jill raised a shoulder. "Delusion or no, I'm convinced that a high percentage of brain-damaged or retarded children can be brought to a good level of self-care and in many cases can function outside institutions. Your son—"

"Don't call him that!"

"But—"

Paul Regier rose. His hands were behind him, but Jill was sure they were clenched. His whole body looked closed, tight, impervious.

"Biologically, the child is mine. I contributed the bit of sperm that rooted in the egg. But the flesh and the blood and the fiber—that all came from the woman."

Echoes of Genesis: the woman tempted me . . .

"Surely what we are to become is coded in our inheritance from both parents," Jill said as calmly as she could. No wonder Mrs. Regier might be hard to work with! "We do not know why some children are flawed."

"Because doctors are fools, women are sentimentalists, and geneticists are frauds!"

"I don't understand, Mr. Regier."

"Don't you?" His voice shook with suppressed fury. "Very well, my sweet humanitarian! No doubt you'll fly this evil stronghold, but you had better know my mind! The only way to create a species fit to hold the power that men have is to mate only sound specimens and do away at birth with infants showing defects."

"O brave new world! And what will you do with those whose deficiencies are revealed later, at two or three or five?"

Remembering Sharon, Jill felt a surge of grief and outrage that made her tremble. Now her hands were clenched, and her voice rose though she knew she was about to get herself summarily fired. "Who'll select these breeding 'specimens'? Supposing they love a person who shouldn't reproduce? And who'll decide what is a flaw?

Shall we try for Hitler's Aryan superman and do away with babies whose hair is dark like yours and mine?"

To her amazement he took her hands, opened them with irresistible fingers, and brought them to his mouth.

"I have needed you," he said, voice almost muffled against her palms, which received his breath with a tingling warmth that flowed through Jill with a sense of drowning, of being overcome, swept along.

Then he dropped her hands, straightened, and smiled, his old arrogance restored. "I foresee interesting conversations! Let's have a ramble. Then we'll go to see your—pupil. And his mother!"

He escorted her to the door, opened it, and though he did not touch her, she felt as if he had.

THREE

Still shaken by that moment when Paul Regïer had kissed her open hands, and even more upset by his outburst of things she shouldn't have heard, Jill could only nod at his remarks as they moved along the corridor to the rear entrance, stepping briefly into several rooms.

An elegantly ceilinged and chandeliered dining room had windows around three sides, opening on formal gardens. A long Regency table, sideboards, and chairs gleamed with polish and the mellow sheen of use and time.

The elegant Adam fireplace had an urn of peonies and luxuriant greenery in its hearth. Two wonderful alabaster carvings stood on the mantel. One was a man stealing fire from a cloud-banked mountain. The other was the same being chained to a rock while a vulture tore at him.

"Prometheus," Paul explained.

Jill's shudder was not wholly feigned. "You always show both sides!"

"Isn't that the only honest course?"

"I suppose it makes for balance," Jill pondered. "But I should think there'd also be a sort of canceling out, people wondering, 'What's the use?' "

"How much do you think people would accomplish who were so easily put off?"

Paul opened a huge double door to give her a glimpse of a vast ballroom. "This belongs to older, leisured days. I don't think we've used it since Johnny's twenty-first birthday party." His long mouth quirked down. "Can you imagine over a hundred young people laughing, dancing, and shrieking?"

She couldn't, not in this house. It struck her suddenly how very quiet it was. Except for Paul, she had not seen or heard anyone.

"I treasure peace," he said, as if reading her mind. "The children have their own wing upstairs. Mrs. Bascom, my excellent housekeeper and cook, lives below stairs with her husband, the head gardener. The second gardener and his wife, who also works here, have a cottage near the stable block. Kelsey's nannie sleeps next door to him, of course. My wife and I have rooms on the wing opposite the children's. You're in between." He smiled, and the warmth of his gaze dissolved the misgivings that stirred in Jill. "Doesn't that make you feel protected?"

"It puts me in the middle, doesn't it?" said Jill. The words were out before she realized they could be taken in more than one way.

"You'll find it convenient," Paul said. "The kitchen is down the other door a bit, but when you want a snack, you'll probably find the upstairs one easiest."

He stood back to let her precede him to the door opening on the broad, shady lawns that stretched beyond the patterned flower beds, precise gravel paths, and stone benches of the large garden visible from the dining room.

Paul opened the door. They walked along the path that angled sharply from the garden, paralleling a high brick wall. It was bordered by a long, narrow strip of flowers that grew high against the wall and graduated in size from tiger lilies, peonies, and Michaelmas daisies to pansies and pinks.

"Quite lovely to be known by a title as formidable as an herbaceous border!" Paul laughed. "The vegetable garden lurks within, and you can see the roof of the old stable block beyond. It's the garage now. The potting sheds, tack rooms, and greenhouses are behind the stable block. Wander wherever you like. For now, I'll just give you a peek at the orchards."

The herbaceous border ended, giving way to what Paul explained were soft fruit frames, netted to keep birds from spoiling the raspberries and currants.

Next to the soft fruit the wall of the vegetable garden ended in a heavy gate joined on the other side to an open-walled shelter Paul called the summer pavilion. He unlatched the gate.

Jill had always loved orchards, but she had never seen one as large as this.

Small green apples were forming, pears and plums were coming on. The air was so fragrant and clean that Jill felt she couldn't get enough of it; she filled her lungs till she was dizzy.

If she hadn't been with the master of Dragon's Mount, she would have run and laughed and leaned her face against the aged warm brick walls. What a beautiful place it was!

The sides of the summer pavilion were overgrown with trailing wisteria and ivy. A fireplace with cooking grills took up most of one wall. But what astonished Jill was the furniture. At first she thought smoothly finished logs and stumps had been grouped for display, but then she saw these were chairs, free-form settees, benches, and tables with their odd shapes and protuberances polished into beauty.

Jill touched an armchair with its back and sides and seat cut from one piece of oak, fluid and smooth. It had been sanded, buffed, and waxed into a creation both natural and full of art.

"Wayland made these," Paul said flatly, as if he didn't relish her admiration for the Celt's work. "He's primarily a smith, though. Works in metals of all kinds. He can even shoe a horse."

"I must meet his wife sometimes," Jill remarked. "She sounds interesting."

"Little Elin? Yes, she is that," Paul nodded. "They live through the oak forest, and beyond them are four hundred acres of wild cattle park. Our dairy stock, the barns, and chickens and so on are located on the other side of the old stable block. Men from the village see to that kind of work."

"It's hard to believe there are places like this in the world. Small, self-contained kingdoms."

"Without kings," amended Paul. "So you met the heir apparent today?"

"I suppose so. We didn't speak till we were getting off." Jill flushed at the memory of how she had lurched into

that preoccupied young man flushed even more deeply at Paul's keen scrutiny.

"Johnny's an engineer," Paul said. "Always building bridges or dams in some place back of beyond! Drops a card now and then, but he hasn't been home in years." He snorted. "Guess it's expecting too much of the young devil to wish that he'd wire or phone or write when he decides to drop from the blue!"

"I suppose lots of young men never think to write or stay in touch," Jill ventured.

"You can't have personal experience of that," Paul teased. "Any fortunate man who could send you letters would! Did you and Johnny discuss Dragon's Mount?"

Jill shook her head. Johnny's poor joke about descending into hell was not one she cared to repeat to Paul. "Mr. Smith pulled up before we could say much of anything."

"Yet he rode all the way from London with you. Lucky pup! Or perhaps it's dull dog!" Paul's eyes were quizzical. "Why didn't he seize the chance to drive out with you?"

"I suppose he had other things to do. He'd been making notes all the way from London."

Paul shook his head incredulously. "That lad is worse off than I feared! Or torrid climes have parboiled his brain! Oh, well! He'll come when it pleases him." Paul turned from the pavilion. "We'd better acquaint you with Kelsey and my wife."

Jill wished there were some way of learning more about Mrs. Regier's opposition to her presence without hinting that Wayland had warned her.

"Have you had other therapists for Kelsey?" she asked.

"We've tried several. None ever stayed long enough to have any success."

"Oh?"

Paul gave Jill a grim look. "They left because my wife was—unpleasant. However, don't let that trouble you. I have told her she must give you a fair chance. If she doesn't, Kelsey goes to a private school for children like him. I'd have sent him long ago, but Branwen clings to him. I hope you're not given to hysteria, Miss Underwood. I loathe it!"

"I think I can promise that my hysterics, if any, will not be a problem for anyone but me," Jill said rather stiffly. "It's not unusual, Mr. Regier, for mothers to feel guilty or possessive about retarded children. Often they feel that placing a child in outside care is abandoning it. Your wife is in a terribly painful position."

"Yes, of course she is," Paul said after a moment in which Jill expected him to retort, *"How about me?"* Because he didn't, Jill felt a rush of sympathetic respect for him.

"I'll do my best not to get on Mrs. Regier's nerves," she promised. "And I'd appreciate it if either Mrs. Regier or you would tell me exactly what my responsibilities are with Kelsey. I don't want to intrude on his nannie's territory, but I want to be of the most help possible."

"Well, you might roughly consider yourself as a tutor, though your authority will be as extensive as you judge best for the lad. Moira, the nannie, will see to him when you need a break. Your weekends are free, and I hope you'll take dinner with whoever turns up around seven, though you may order a tray in your room when you prefer."

"That's kind of you," Jill evaded.

"It's lonely of me," Paul said. "The truth is, Miss Underwood, that my wife usually dines in her room and I in my study, since that dining room is oppressive when one's alone. But if Johnny's back for a time, we should try to behave like normal people. And you seem blessedly normal!"

Bread, butter, and milk, Jill thought, stung. Yes, I suppose that's how I must seem to Paul Regier!

They were at the house now. Paul led the way to the rear and paused by a heavy door set on big brass hinges in a high wall.

"This is the children's garden," he said. "Kelsey spends most of his time here when the weather's reasonable. Vivian, my daughter, should be home from school, so you may meet the family at one swoop! Don't let Vivian annoy you. She's prickly and independent."

"Mr. Smith said she was ten," Jill said softly, remem-

bering her own fears and bewilderments at that age, not quite a child, far from womanhood. "That's not very old!"

"You don't know Vivian." Paul's mouth bent down. "There's a core of icy wisdom in her as ancient as the frost that Norse myths say the world came from! And she can freeze you with a look, believe me!"

"Nobody likes to be cold."

Paul shrugged. "Try telling her that! What you do in your free time is your own concern, even if you spend some of it trying to melt that little iceberg. But please remember that you are here to work with Kelsey. Vivian is most adequately looked after."

"I shall certainly not neglect my job," Jill said, "but as you say, I will have free time!"

"I wish I could take that as more of a promise than a threat."

"What?"

"Maundering, Miss Underwood. Forgive it. Come now and meet Kelsey."

FOUR

Jill passed before her employer into a small, walled courtyard, part garden, part playground.

A girl with long, black hair lay in a hammock slung between two chestnuts at the far corner, reading, her back to the rest of the place.

On a lounge chair by a fish pond drowsed a woman with reddish hair, her face half-covered by a sun hat. Next to her sat a golden-haired boy. He was watching the fish, making small cooing sounds, and now and then reaching for them. It was behavior charming in a toddler. But this child was seven or eight. As he saw Jill, he got up and ran to her, putting his arms around her waist and hugging her.

Jill held him and fought her tears.

The woman with red-gold hair hastily came forward to disengage Kelsey. She had a broad face and flawless, creamy skin. With a curious glance at Jill she pointed at the fish, luring Kelsey back to them.

Paul said pleasantly to her, "Moira, Miss Underwood is going to—tutor Kelsey. I'm sure you'll cooperate with her in every way."

"Yes, sir," Moira answered. She nodded at Jill. "Nice to have you, I'm sure."

That didn't sound faintly sincere. Jill glanced up into the hostile eyes of a slim young woman who sat in a glider some distance from the pond. Paul moved toward her.

"Branwen, love, come meet Miss Underwood."

"Good day," said Branwen with a perfectly pleasant smile that still only touched the edge of her lips.

"It's nice to meet you," said Jill, feeling like an awkward peasant. Something about the stillness of a woman so young was eerie. She might have been an automaton except when she looked at her son.

"What are you working on?" Paul asked as Branwen glanced down at her needlework. He explained to Jill, "Branwen has done some fabulous things. Her tapestries will be heirlooms one day."

"I'm making Kelsey a quilt," Branwen said. But she did not show the linen block.

"My dear, he must have dozens!" Paul protested. His tone was light, but a darker mood ran under it. "Am I never to have any more initialed handkerchiefs and scarves then?"

"You've had enough from me," Branwen said so flatly that Jill almost gasped.

Was that pain on the man's lean, strong face before his features became a mask? His voice sounded angry, defeated, and determined all at once. "I'm sure my wife will help you all she can," he told Jill.

Branwen's full, well-shaped mouth turned down grimly at the edges. She stared at him from brilliant, dark eyes.

"How sure you are of so many things, Paul!"

His dark eyebrows raised. "For example?"

"You were so sure our child would be perfect, remember?"

Paul's face went bleak and stony. "All anyone can do is try to help the child—or perhaps you'd rather he never progressed?"

Something blazed for an instant in Branwen's pale face, beautiful despite its strain. "You have things just as you want them, Paul—except for your children! And there's nothing anyone or anything—teachers, therapists, or enviroment—can do for Kelsey! It would be kinder to leave him alone!"

She turned to watch her pretty little son as he plunged his hands in the pond after the elusive fish.

Paul shrugged, turning away. "Don't worry about Branwen," he said quietly. "She knows she'd better behave if Kelsey's to stay here."

"You wouldn't send him away without her consent!" Jill protested.

"No. She'll stop just short of the offense that would

cause it." Paul's lips curled. "Kelsey I shall have always with me."

There was that to remember. Considering Paul's perfectionist nature, it was a great deal. He was doing all he could for a child whose existence must be a bitter reproach to him, while there was estrangement between him and his oldest son. As Branwen had taunted, Paul was not lucky with his children.

So he could not be as harsh as he might act. After all, who knew what had happened between him and Branwen? She had certainly not put on much show of devotion or cordiality!

As he turned toward the girl in the hammock, Paul hesitated a moment. He suddenly looked very tired. Did Branwen still have a hold on him then, in spite of his cold way of speaking of her?

"Vivian is as flawed as Kelsey," he said tonelessly.

"She seems perfection from here."

"Physically, yes. But they left the heart out of her. She has the outgoing charm of a computer."

"It can't have helped her to grow up without a mother."

Naked pain showed in his face, quickly controlled. "Her mother, a perfect *lady,* ran off with another man."

"It still is scarcely Vivian's fault."

"No, doubtless it's mine," said Paul in a voice Jill searched for sarcasm but did not find. He took her forward.

Slim and graceful, one bare honey-brown foot dangling from the hammock, the girl paid no attention as they approached, though she must have heard their feet on the gravel.

Paul said under his breath, "You may be sure she's already given you a few good old-fashioned looks and known from the moment we came that we were here!"

Vivian turned a page, stretched lazily, and yawned. She did not turn around. Paul surveyed her, his lips compressed. Apparently this superb child put him on edge much more than the pitiful little boy.

"It must be a good book, Vivian," he said.

"Not especially." She turned slowly, lounging back in a

way that was insulting, flicking her gray eyes from him to Jill. Her regal manner was amusing in a bare-legged ten- or eleven-year-old, yet it was definitely part of her. "But any book is more entertaining than this—this nursery!"

"You've had the company of ninety girls all day. I should think you'd enjoy some calm."

Vivian gave a studied shrug that Jill would have sworn she had practiced in front of a mirror till it was an exact mimic of some bored film star. "Not really. It's deadly dull at Dragon's Mount."

Could Vivian be jealous because she had no one particularly her own, while Kelsey had both a mother and nannie? The girl returned Paul's angry stare from eyes that were the precise color of his. Jill suspected that they resembled each other in more than looks.

"You need a good boarding school," said Paul.

That shattered the indolent pose. Vivian sat up so fast she almost overturned the hammock. "No! I—I'd hate it! Day school's bad enough!"

"But if you're too old and clever for this nursery, as you just called it, you should enjoy a change."

Vivian clenched her fingers into a tight fist. "I—I want to stay here," she muttered. Jill felt sorry for the girl, trapped between her air of superiority and Paul's cure.

"You can pretend here," said Paul in a hard voice. "Lie in a hammock and make up dreams. But the evidence is that it's not good for you."

"Please," Vivian whispered as he turned on his heel. "Please!" And Jill knew that was not an easy word for her to say.

"You've got to start living in the here and now."

"Why?" Vivian darted past Jill, planting herself in front of Paul. "You—you don't live in the world like other people! You live here at Dragon's Mount, where everyone has to do exactly what you say!"

They confronted each other, the tall master of the estate and his young, half-orphaned daughter.

Paul's tone was suddenly weary. "I'll give some thought to your best interest, Vivian. I'd advise you to do the same. I will not tolerate insolence or boredom."

He moved forward. Vivian sullenly gave way. But she said as he passed, "Dreams turn into nightmares, Branwen says."

"Does she indeed?" Something flickered across Paul's face. "Well, if Dragon's Mount is my dream—or nightmare—I should think you'd want to take yourself out of it. I'll think about it."

He held a door to the house open for Jill. She looked back at Vivian with a smile she tried to make reassuring. The child returned a cool gaze that seemed wrong in anyone that young.

"So she's got around you too," said Paul. He took Jill's elbow and helped her over the sill. "That's how she is, the little witch!"

"She probably does have a hard time at school," Jill said defensively. "She'd stand out from average children like—"

"Like a peacock in a chicken pen," Paul interrupted. "Yes, her mother had that quality." His face clouded, and his tone chilled. "Vivian needs a firm hand."

"But not crushing!" Jill protested. She had reached the top of the stairs and could see far down the gallery to her room. She swung to face Paul. Once again, as in their first meeting, their eyes were on a level. "She obviously hates the thought of boarding school. I do hope you won't make her go!"

Paul smiled suddenly, the tired, gaunt look vanishing. "If you'd have dinner with me, I'd be in such a genial mood that I'd forget that silly child. At least till you've had time to make friends with her, as I've no doubt you mean to do."

"I want to make friends with everyone at Dragon's Mount."

His dark eyes appraised Jill. A curious, frightening warmth shot through her.

"You will if anyone can," he said with a slight nod. Smiling, he took her hands. "But crusty despots like me need friends too. You *will* dine with me?"

"But if your son's just home after so long away—"

"He hasn't broken his neck getting here," Paul observed

wryly. "Anyway, he enjoys a pretty girl's company, even if he doesn't know how to show it."

"Oh?" came a voice from up the hall. "You must give me some lessons, Father."

Jill snatched back her hands, as she caught a glimpse of Johnny Regier's face.

Mocking? Disappointed? Angry?

Some of all three.

FIVE

Jill took her favorite yellow challis dress out of the gargoyle wardrobe and pulled it on before she began to give her hair a furious brushing.

What had Johnny assumed? Why had he had to come around the corner in time to see Paul holding her hands like that? Jill's cheeks burned, and she brushed harder.

Johnny had no right to rush off before they could talk a little, restore normalcy! Especially when he hadn't been home in years.

It was hard to think of Johnny as anybody's child. Or Paul as anyone's father, for that matter.

Kelsey was a living grief. Vivian needn't have been a disappointment, though. Why hadn't Paul exerted himself to make her feel that she had at least one parent who cared about her?

Jill's head throbbed from jostling questions and the tug of her brush. She straightened and crossed to the bay window. English summer days were long. Sun still bathed the rolling Mendip hills. Far away, swathed in gentle haze, rose Glastonbury Tor.

From the other window she saw the walled garden. A gardener was busy hoeing. A short woman in a plaid skirt walked along the herbaceous border, filling a basket with peonies. She stopped to laugh and talk with a man who was edging the path.

Dragon's Mount was alive and happy.

But that back garden where Paul's children played was a haunting and, in some ways, sad place. What a difference it could make if Branwen were happy, if Vivian sparkled about instead of closing herself in a remote dream world!

I can make it a bit gayer, Jill thought. *And I can be happy here myself, work and learn.*

She must not be drawn into Paul Regier's life, except as a capable employee. Her job was with Kelsey and, by extension, with Vivian.

The vigorous brushing had made Jill's hair vibrantly fluffy. She fastened it back with a yellow ribbon, stared hard at herself in the mirror. The challis dress with its deliberately old-fashioned style and long gathered sleeves made her look like a high school girl; her hair made it worse.

Next time she dined downstairs, if there were a next time, she would do her hair up, try a sophisticated French knot or braided coronet.

No, she wouldn't!

Even if he were not married and old enough to be her father, Paul was clearly a disastrous man to be interested in. Johnny—? Jill gave herself a shake.

Marriage was a one-day-maybe possibility far at the back of Jill's plans. Any man who took her would have to let her help children like Sharon and Kelsey grow into adults who had a place in the world outside institutions.

It was this urgency that had kept Jill's few love interests from going past kisses. "Are you planning to be a nun or something?" one boyfriend had demanded angrily.

The only other one Jill almost loved had walked her to the door one night, kissed her gently, and said, "I'd like to marry you, Jill. But I want a full-time wife. No chance, is there?"

"No." She had kept her voice steady in spite of a stab of pain.

"Then I'm cutting out, honey, before either of us buys too much grief." His lips brushed her forehead.

She had cried that night, felt loss for weeks, but she had known he was right. She was no good for a man who would demand her whole attention.

And what other kind would be interesting enough to live with?

Paul wouldn't like it if she came late to dinner! Touch-

ing up her lipstick, Jill turned on the Amazon lamp by her bed. Old as she was, it made her jumpy to enter a dark room at night.

She hesitated as she closed her door. There must be a key. Still, it shouldn't be necessary to lock it while she was out, and there was an inner bolt she could fasten when she was inside.

Now that no direct light spilled through the sky window, the hall was dim.

Johnny would be at the table probably. Would Branwen? Jill went downstairs and through the hall to the dining room.

Entering, she almost collided with Johnny, who stood in front of Paul. It was as if they had heard her coming and each tried to reach the door first.

Johnny's blue eyes danced. His long mouth curved down on one side as he tilted his head and surveyed her.

"Alice in Wonderland," he teased.

"And you're the Mad Hatter," she shot back.

He shook his head. "No. I'm the Cheshire cat. I just fade away."

As he had in the hall less than an hour ago? What had he and his father talked about since then? Paul took Jill's arm, steered her toward a high-backed chair that faced him from the end of the table. A bowl of peonies reflected on the gleaming wood.

"Sit down, old chap," he bade his son. "A fatted calf is in order after—seven years, isn't it? Hope you'll settle for roast beef!"

"I'm afraid I don't qualify for a prodigal's feast," said Johnny. "I've no intention of staying in the ancestral halls longer than necessary to ease my mind on a few things."

Gray eyes clashed with blue. Johnny's smile was a reckless taunt. If it were possible to look even colder and stonier, Paul did.

"I hope you won't talk riddles while you're here, Johnny. That could make your visit thoroughly tiresome."

"I didn't make up the riddles," Johnny shot back.

A tap came from the side door. Pushing a trolley laden with delicious-smelling food, a short, broad woman came

in. She was clad in a wild purple plaid skirt and an oatmeal-colored Irish cardigan that could have made even the shapeliest person look formless. It was she Jill had glimpsed in the herbaceous.

She had remarkably clear rosy skin, black hair frizzy from a tight permanent, and soot-dark eyes that fastened excitedly on Jill.

"Miss Underwood," said Paul, "this is Mrs. Bascom. I truly couldn't get along without her! Mrs. Bascom, Miss Underwood is Kelsey's new tutor."

"Lord love the little mite, let's pray she can help him! It's nice to have you here, miss. Let me know, do, if there's anything I can help you with."

"Thank you," smiled Jill. "How wonderful the food smells."

"Ah, I hope you're one to like your meals! These scrawny girls who worry about every bite drive me to brainstorms!" As she spoke, Mrs. Bascom was unloading the trolley. Purple pleats swung against her legs like breaking waves.

Whisking covers from bowls and platters, Mrs. Bascom revealed a beautiful prime piece of roast beef, gravy, roast potatoes, brussels sprouts, and broad beans in sauce.

"Eat up, Mr. Johnny!" coaxed Mrs. Bascom. "Too thin you are! Gulping Scotch eggs or sausage and cheese in some pub is no way to stay healthy!"

"Callie, love, I haven't been sick a day since I left school!" Johnny blew her a kiss. "All the same, I'm glad to have a chance at your cooking again. What have we got for a sweet? Treacle tart? Sponge pudding? Chocolate blanc mange?"

Mrs. Bascom giggled, shaking her head so that the corkscrew curls bounced. "You aren't so grownup, Mr. Johnny! Still interested in the sweet before you've had your vegetables! Well, just you wait and be surprised!"

She pushed the trolley to one side and disappeared with a swish of purple.

"Good old Callie!" Johnny toasted her with a flourished water goblet. "The bright spot of my youthful existence was the certainty that during holidays from

school Callie would concoct a surfeit of gooey sponge puddings, treacle tarts, and chocolate blanc mange molded into rabbits, which I devoured without mercy!"

"Shrewsbury wasn't that bad," Paul said.

"No, not after I survived the first two years. As a lordly sixth former, Miss Underwood, I went about muffled in an incredibly long scarf striped with the house colors. I suppose that would be the equivalent of one of your high school seniors swaggering about in a sports letter jacket." He shuddered. "I loathed cricket and football, which you, I believe, know better as soccer."

"He was always at the top of his form in Latin and history." Paul's tone was accusing as he carved the beef. "So what did he go into? Building bridges and mucking about with dams!"

"It's a living," Johnny returned placidly. "I like making bridges from here to there. One explores lots of country that way. Have you been exploring, Miss Underwood?"

"There hasn't been much time." Jill helped herself to vegetables. "I've been meeting the children."

"And Father."

"Stop being awkward," rapped out Paul. "I naturally must form some idea of Miss Underwood before turning Kelsey over to her."

"And what idea, if I may be so bold, has my stepmother formed of this young lady?" Johnny glanced about. "I trust Branwen's not ill?"

"She likes to be near Kelsey," Paul said abruptly. "And I hope I needn't tell you that our domestic arrangements and my wife's opinions are really none of your business."

Johnny made a disclaiming gesture. "I couldn't approve more! What with Moira sulky and Branwen obsessed with Kelsey's problem, the kids would profit by having a normal adult around."

"Where's anyone more normal than Moira?" demanded Paul.

"Moira has worshipped Branwen since they were children and carries the passion over to Kelsey. She hasn't a twinge of imagination or empathy. Have you, Miss Underwood?"

"Maybe too much," Jill admitted. She glanced ruefully at Paul. "In my work with individual children, I've been criticized for getting too involved. But I don't see how anyone can be with a child day after day and *not* have feelings! Possibly destructive ones, but still a personal response to that certain child."

Johnny laughed outright. "A romanticist behind that competent American facade!" His gay blue eyes flicked over Paul. "You'd be surprised at how many people manage not to have real feelings about anyone."

"There can't be many!"

"More than enough, Miss Underwood. Enough to leave human wreckage junked at every twist in their character. Such people love themselves —or their fantasies. God pity ordinary humans who get in their way."

"I would never have guessed you were such a dramatist!"

"Oh, he is." Controlled fury laced Paul's voice. "Especially when he's inventing the script about being the misused offspring of a vain beauty and a selfish father!"

"Not selfish. Irrational."

Paul shrugged, controlled again. "If it's irrational to think people should live more satisfying lives than they do, then I'm irrational and glad of it!"

" 'The quality of life!' " Johnny's taunt was obviously a quote.

Now Paul laughed. "Nothing will ever convince me that it's not more important than the quality of bridges or dams. Will you have some more, Miss Underwood?"

Paul didn't give Johnny a chance to begin afresh but started telling Jill about interesting places to visit in her free time.

Glastonbury, of course, with Arthur's tomb, the ruin of St. Michael's church on the Tor, the huge white chalk horse inlaid on a slope on the way to Silbury and its curious, giant mound.

"Cadbury, the hilltop stronghold of Arthur or some chieftain like him, is only a few miles west," Paul said. "But I'm afraid the spires of 'towered Camelot' were wooden lookout posts rather like those we see in your

Western forts at the cinema. And Stonehenge isn't more than two hours away, with Avebury and its great stone circle on the route."

Jill laughed, gave her head an unbelieving little shake. "Glastonbury—King Arthur—Stonehenge—Avalon! It's like stepping into a magic landscape that might vanish any moment into the mists!"

"Oh, when people vanish here, we call the police," Paul assured her. "Constable Strother's far from legendary!"

"Well, I'll explore Dragon's Mount before I go on a pilgrimage."

"You can use the little Riley any time you get to it first," Paul offered.

"Thank you. I'd better practice staying on the left side a good bit before I venture out on the main road, though."

"I'll be around for this weekend at least," Johnny said. "Let me take you on that first journey among our old ghosts."

Jill looked at Paul.

"Your weekends are your own," he said. "As I told you, your task is to help Kelsey develop to his optimum. You are not a babysitter." He lifted an eyebrow at Johnny. "Are you between jobs, by any chance?"

"No, I've just been saving up holidays till I felt like coming to England. And Elin wanted me to see her dance with the bulls on St. John's Day."

"The twenty-fourth of June," Paul said absently, frowning. His gaze swung piercingly to Johnny. "So you've been writing to Elin if not to us!"

"I've let you know I was above ground several times a year," Johnny retorted. "I *am* twenty-eight! And Elin was my playmate."

"So was Branwen."

Johnny's mouth quirked in a way that was very like Paul's. "Yes, but she married my father, the lord of the manor."

"I wish Elin would stop somersaulting around with those park cattle," Paul scowled, veering to another sub-

ject. "She's bound to fall! Why doesn't Wayland stop her?"

"Have you tried to stop Elin from doing anything?" Johnny asked.

"It's time I tried, since neither you nor Wayland has any sense," said Paul grimly. He rang the bell. "Elin needs a baby. It'd cure some of her wildness, settle her down."

"Elin doesn't want to settle down, Father." Was there a challenge in Johnny's eyes? "You should know that."

Mrs. Bascom appeared, cleared the table, and crumbed it with the gusty efficiency of a tame whirlwind. She wheeled out the trolley and was back in seconds with another one she must have left right beyond the door.

Eyes twinkling, she poised her hand over the big crystal platter covered with a silver dome. "Guess, Mr. Johnny?"

"Double helpings if I'm right?"

"Even if you're wrong," she giggled.

He closed his eyes, inhaled as if seeking inspiration or a clue. "Chocolate blanc mange?"

She swept off the cover. A large chocolate rabbit quivered there. "Just the way you used to like it!" Mrs. Bascom triumphed.

Full of pride, she began to dish it into crystal dessert dishes.

"I won't have blanc mange, Mrs. Bascom," said Paul. "A few wholemeal biscuits with coffee will do nicely, thank you."

Mrs. Bascom looked mournful. She left one empty dish glittering beside the rejected chocolate bunny and scurried off to return with a coffee tray and small plate of what Jill would have called chocolate-covered cookies.

Paul offered them to Jill. "No, thanks," she said. "The blanc mange is lovely, but chocolate will be my undoing if I don't watch it."

She was sure that Paul's refusal of the dessert had been almost childish pique that his cook had made Johnny's special childhood favorite rather than cater to the master's preferences.

Poor Mrs. Bascom! So pleased one moment, so down-

cast the next! She brightened, though, as Johnny took a large second helping and Jill asked for a small one.

"I thought you feared chocolate," Paul chided. "Still, it's a child's dessert and, you aren't very old."

"I shall love blanc mange when I'm ninety!" Jill retorted. "If you'll excuse me, I'd like to ask Mrs. Bascom for the recipe while I have it in mind."

"Permit me to wish you the joy of consuming thousands of chocolate blanc mange rabbits," said Paul, saluting her with his coffee cup. As Jill went out, closing the door behind her, she saw Mrs. Bascom just vanishing up the stairs and decided to ask for the recipe another time.

Turning to the dining room, Jill heard Johnny speak abruptly. "I think I'll drive over to see Elin and Wayland, Father. Give my regards to Branwen, won't you?"

"She'll think it strange you didn't give them yourself," answered Paul. Jill froze outside the door, unwilling to step into an awkward moment, equally unwilling to hear, yet held by the tone of the men's voices.

"Branwen can't find my behavior odder than I find hers," Johnny said. "Doesn't she enjoy my mother's place, the place she itched to fill? And if she feels she must hover over Kelsey, why don't you seek her company? God knows you used to!"

"That's enough!" Paul rapped out. "You may think my life a disaster if you choose, but I won't be lectured to by my own son!"

Jill started to tiptoe away to give them time to resolve their quartel, but she checked at Johnny's slow, painful accusation. "You want perfection. When you don't find it in humans, you discard them. It's quite a sacrificial heap you've raised to your dream."

"Must I remind you that it was your mother, not I, who ran off with a lover, deserted a family?"

"She had good reason!"

"And how do you know I didn't have?" Paul sounded as if he bit off his words, got control of himself. "Let's not drag this out, son. It's over with, done and finished."

"I've decided that it's not." Johnny's voice cut like a blade. Jill could picture them, surely standing by now,

both within a shade of six feet tall, but Paul fleshed to match his height while Johnny was thin, almost gaunt. "There are quite a few things I accepted in the shock of seven years ago that don't seem at all straightforward now."

"We can rake over the whole sorry business to your heart's content," Paul said heavily. "But we'll do it in private!"

There was a long pause, then Jill entered the room.

Johnny nodded assent, turned to Jill, eyes masked and impersonal. "Good night, Miss Underwood. I hope you sleep well. I understand that first nights in strange houses are often restless."

"People travel too much for such indulgences now," said Jill. "Good night."

He went out through the side door. His voice, jollying Mrs. Bascom, floated back for a moment, then was gone.

"I'd better go," Jill said after a few moments of silence, distressed by this conflict she only partly understood. "Thank you for having me down, Mr. Regier."

He caught her wrist. "Don't leave!" His eyes were brilliant with dancing points of light. Though his fingers clasped her loosely, she could not move.

Why was it that he could hold her like this, with touch or voice or gaze? Had it been so for Johnny's mother, Branwen, others . . . ? In spite of the quick race of her blood Jill felt a warning, an edge of fear.

"Come along to my study for a while," Paul urged. "As long as you're with me, the dragons will lurk in the fireplace and that fiery crab who visits me now and then won't appear."

But later? Will I see monsters too?

It was hard to refuse. Johnny's troubling assault on his father had made Jill sympathize with Paul, whatever his blame in his wife's deserting him and her children. Jill had to sternly remind herself that she was there to help Kelsey. She wasn't there to fend off Paul's phantoms, provide him with fleeting entertainment that would help him forget that his first wife had run away and his second, in a different, tragic fashion, had also withdrawn herself.

"I—I'm sorry," Jill stammered. "I'm very tired. Please forgive me, but I can't stay." She tried to remove her hand from his. "Good night, Mr. Regier."

He released her with a curving of his lips that was not a smile. "My night cannot be good, but I wish you a serene one, in spite of your lack of charity to the bedeviled! After all, you didn't create my problems! Should you ever need books to drowse with, do feel free to choose from my shelves in the study." He escorted her to the door in that old-world way she found so appealing. "I'll see you to your room."

"Thank you, but it isn't necessary."

This time he did smile, but set his hand under her elbow and propelled her to the stairs. "It's not necessary, but it's nice! You shan't balk me of all my wishes, fair foolish one!"

They were halfway up when Mrs. Bascom called from the study door: "Oh, Mr. Regier, sir! Pardon, but you're wanted on the telephone!"

He grimaced. "Thank you, Mrs. Bascom, I'll be there in a moment!" He marched Jill up the stairs and down the corridor to her room. "There!" he breathed. "In spite of hell, your protests, telephones, and Mrs. Bascom's rounded, fascinated stare!" He made a mocking half-bow. "Good night!"

Jill watched him disappearing down the stairs, perversely wished they were spending another hour or so together, gave herself an admonishing shake, and opened the door.

She expected soft light from the bedside lamp. Instead, the room was in total darkness.

SIX

Jill distinctly remembered turning on the Amazon lamp to avoid coming into a dark, strange room. Perhaps the bulb had burned out. Or Mrs. Bascom might have come in to cast a housekeeperly eye about; but Mrs. Bascom had been on the run downstairs.

The bulb had burned out or jiggled loose till it lost contact. That was it. Jill ran her fingers along the wall, hoping for a switch, but found none.

Now that her eyes were getting used to the blackness, Jill could see patches of lighter outside night through the windows. These helped her orient herself.

Groping for the bedstead, she touched cold brass knobs, turned the corner, and moved for the table. Reaching out carefully, so that she wouldn't knock the lamp over, she found it, located the bulb.

It was so hot she burned her fingers. Jerking back, she knew that if the bulb had indeed come loose or burned out, it had done so with remarkable timing, just as she came upstairs.

She ran her fingers down to the push-in switch. At a click, the lamp came on. She turned to see Branwen Regier standing by the gargoyle wardrobe. In a green satin robe, with her long hair flowing below her waist, she looked like a medieval princess.

Oddly, Jill felt as if she were the trespasser. Annoyed by this and her moment of fright, she asked sharply, "Is something of yours in my room? You really might have asked for it rather than let me blunder about in the dark!"

"I thought when you saw the light was out, you'd go for Paul or Bascom and I could get away handily." Amber eyes beneath straight black brows studied Jill. "There's nothing of mine here, Miss Underwood."

She said this in such a contemptuous way, her gaze flicking over Jill's things on the dresser and desk, that Jill flushed.

"Maybe I've nothing you want, Mrs. Regier, but *I* want my privacy. Please don't enter my room uninvited!"

"Suppose I do?" asked the black-haired girl with a mocking smile.

"I shall tell Mr. Regier."

"Will you indeed?"

Branwen played with the antique metal belt that girdled her robe. It was a chain with links in the shape of lions' heads. If it were gold—and it looked to be—it was no wonder she scorned Jill's belongings. She contemplated Jill for a long silence, then let her lips set in that faint, bitter smile which was already becoming familiar to Jill.

"If I opened my door to Paul, he would not even glance at yours!"

"That's why you came!" cried Jill in sudden illumination. "You wanted to see if—if there were signs of Mr. Regier in the room!"

Branwen swept toward the door. "If you've any of the common sense Yankees are renowned for, you'll leave Dragon's Mount, young woman. Paul could charm a vestal virgin. But there's no comfort or safety in his love. It's like trying to warm yourself with ice."

"You still love him!"

"Do I?" Branwen pondered. "I think not. But I shall never let him forget me with another woman!"

"Then why don't you be friends with him again? It would be so much better for Kelsey!"

Branwen spun from the door. "Don't presume to advise me—or feel sorry for me, either! I will never change while Paul lives, never give him peace! You can't do any good here. Better for you and all of us if you go away! Go while you can!"

She flung out, closing the door behind her. A draft rushed through the room, swishing the heavy draperies. Jill locked the door. She wanted no more unexpected visitors that night.

Feeling as battered and tossed about as if she had tum-

bled through a wind tunnel, Jill sank down in the skeletal recliner.

So much—too much—had happened in the scarcely more than eight hours she had been in this house. Paul Regier himself would have been more than enough for one day's discovery. But there had been Wayland, his sister Branwen, improbably married to the master of the great house, frigid Vivian, and Kelsey, so small and pathetic it clutched Jill's heart.

And Johnny. Challenging his father, raising alarming questions. Should she have agreed to go sightseeing with him on Saturday?

Avalon, the Island of the Blessed! This was more an island of the damned.

Fatigue dulled the edges of Jill's mind, yet she could not keep from reviewing what she knew of Paul. He was far and away the most fascinating man she had ever met. And he was lonely . . .

Jill willed her thoughts away from him. Tomorrow she would begin with Kelsey. It would be her first chance to work independently.

Forcing herself out of the chair, Jill got ready for bed. She left the bathroom light on. After the day she'd had, she didn't care to wake startled in the night and not be able to see.

It was June, but the light blanket felt good. Jill settled among fluffy down pillows. She hoped Branwen and Moira would not be so difficult that they'd hamper her efforts with that beautiful little boy who would always have the mind of a child.

Morning, golden and brilliant, flooded in. Jill knew at once where she was. She felt, in fact, as if she had lived at Dragon's Mount a long time. For a few minutes she luxuriated in the comfort of the big bed, but the brightness drew her.

Springing up, she ran to look toward Glastonbury. Soft mists shrouded the distance, opaque in the sunlight that would soon dissolve them. The grass sparkled with jeweled dew, and squirrels bounded under the spreading copper

beech, while a golden pheasant strutted past a pair of rabbits nibbling the edge of the rockery.

Poachers and some gardeners would have been after them with traps. Jill hoped such things were outlawed at Dragon's Mount. She crossed to the other window.

Early as it was—seven by her watch—two men were at work in the walled garden. A young man busy with the strawberry frames evidently found a choice berry and turned, laughing, to pop it into the mouth of a woman who was picking lettuce, claiming a kiss for his payment. The other gardener and his wife, the pair must be.

Oh, buy my love with strawberries, the fruit sweet as your lips . . .

Jill gave herself a shake. What maundering! She didn't have a love to say those words to, nor did she want one—most of the time! Unless she met a man who would let her go on with her chosen field, she would never marry. Strawberries, indeed!

She dressed quickly in green flared slacks and a lighter green, long-sleeved shirt, tied back her hair with a matching scarf. Her usual makeup was lipstick, and that was all she bothered with before going around the corridor to the upstairs kitchen.

Vivian, dressed in a school uniform of a gray pleated skirt, striped tie, and blue shirt, appeared long enough to snatch several spicy buns and a glass of chocolate milk.

A general "Hallo" was her only speech. As she went out bearing her food, Jill noticed tangles in the silky black hair and wished she could brush them out.

Prickly-proud Vivian, who needed a mother so, whether she knew it or not!

Jill was on her second cup of coffee when Branwen came in and began arranging a tray which she obviously meant to carry back for herself and Kelsey.

"If this kitchen gets more crowded, it'll be impossible to move!" was her greeting. "I'd better scramble Kelsey some eggs. He'll need them if you're going to be after him all day!"

"I won't exhaust him," Jill said, holding her temper. After all, it was cruelly hard to have a retarded child.

Branwen wore hip-hugging jeans and a puckered knit shirt, clothes that Jill would not have expected to find in her wardrobe, for Branwen was nothing if not regal. She looked now like a princess in lithe masquerade—a very pouty princess. Jill stacked her cup and saucer in the dishwasher.

"Why don't you bring Kelsey to the garden after he's had breakfast?" she suggested.

Branwen said icily, "I'll send him with his nannie. I can't prevent this charade, Miss Underwood, but don't expect me to help with it!"

"You might at least give me a chance," Jill said, choking down rising anger. "After all, it might help Kelsey." Before Branwen could goad her into an outburst, she went out and down the back stairs to the garden, spirits calming in the tingling air.

A sandbox, swings, the goldfish pool. Jill eyed the resources critically and began to make a mental list of play equipment that should challenge Kelsey, develop his coordination and perception.

Moira soon came down with Kelsey. "Hallo!" she greeted Jill. "I'll have my breakfast now and rest off a bit. Damned tiresome, you know, hovering over Kelsey all the time. I'm certainly glad Paul decided to get me some help."

Hugging Kelsey, who had run to embrace her, Jill saw no use in pointing out that she had not been engaged to give Moira time off from nanniehood. After Branwen's hostility, the woman's careless friendliness was welcome.

Moira had an earthy, vigorous appeal, but her Junoesque figure was in danger of spreading, and her mass of coppery hair needed attention almost as much as Vivian's.

"When does Kelsey have lunch?"

Moira paused in midflight to the house. "When he's hungry, he'll let you know."

"How?"

"He'll pull you toward the kitchen."

"You mean he has no regular meals?"

"He doesn't want them." Moira's easy good nature turned sullenly defensive. "If you try to feed him before he

wants it, he throws it on the floor." She stopped again at the entrance. "You want to be alone with Kelsey, don't you? I'd only be in the way?"

"I need a few days to get to know him," Jill said. "But after that it'll be important for you and his mother, if she chooses, to be with us part of the time so you understand my methods and carry on with them when you're alone with Kelsey."

"Do you think he can learn anything?" Moira demanded. Hope and despair roughened her voice. "Poor little brat, when I think of him growing up every way but in his brain . . ." She shook her head. "I try not to think about it, that's the truth!"

"Till I've been with him a while, I wouldn't dare guess," Jill said. "But I would think he can improve to the point that he could have a pleasant life outside an institution. Especially if everyone who has much to do with him will help."

"You show me, and I'll do it," Moira vowed. "I—I love the little tyke. There just hasn't seemed to be anything that helps him, and Paul—Paul doesn't *share* being a parent with Branwen. That's why she's so bitter. She thinks Paul doesn't love the boy." Moira shrugged. "It's bad, each of them blaming the other for poor Kelsey being like he is."

Uneasy at these confidences, Jill stroked the boy's golden hair. "I'm sure Mr. Regier doesn't blame his wife. These things happen."

"He doesn't think they should happen to *him,*" Moira said harshly. "He's got a nerve! At least two of his kids are all right! He should make it lighter for Branwen, not always be at her to send Kelsey to an institution." Advancing on Jill, Moira added fiercely, "It's heaven's judgment on his pride that Kelsey's like this and Vivian's an icicle!"

"But he's done all he can for the youngsters," Jill defended in spite of herself. "And he hasn't sent Kelsey away, out of sight."

"Kelsey's mostly out of his sight!" Moira charged. "Yesterday was the first time he'd visited us in weeks!"

"Please, Moira! You shouldn't tell me this!"

Moira swallowed. "I know I shouldn't but—oh, well, I'm sorry!"

She went in, leaving Jill protectively stroking Kelsey's head. Gazing about the courtyard with its trees, flowers, fish pool, and play equipment, Jill thought that Paul must have prepared it years ago with confidence that happy, whole children, born of his body, would play here.

Garden of Eden?

From the story of Adam and Eve, Jill remembered dimly how God had walked in the garden in the cool of the day to meet with his children and see how they fared. But when he found the serpent's spoor, he rejected his own creations.

For Paul the blighting serpent was deformity. Wasn't such a demand for perfection in itself a dangerous law?

Calling on all her acquired professional discipline and will power, Jill forced Paul from her mind, or at least to the back of it, and gave her attention to the little boy who looked up at her with trusting, clear blue eyes.

Jill spent the morning getting acquainted with Kelsey, her professional mind assessing him while she responded to him physically and emotionally with cuddles, smiles, and just letting him rest against her when he tired.

She was getting hungry when he began to pull her toward the door to the stairs. She took his hand, and he laughed, wriggling free, running up the stairs in front of her. He had good motor control. Jill was grateful. She had worked with children who had not been able to walk till hours of patterned crawling taught their brains coordination.

He didn't wait for her at the top of the stairs, but ran off, giggling. His playfulness was good too, since play was the main way children learned.

"Kelsey!" Jill called when she got to the gallery. "Lunch!"

She went into the kitchen, glad to find it deserted. Being around people was good for Kelsey, but when he needed to concentrate, they would distract him.

The dining room was empty too, but Moira waved from the lounge beyond, lemonade in hand. Voices, some shrill,

some syrupy, indicated that she was immersing herself in the problems of television characters. Jill waved back and shut the kitchen door to the adjoining rooms.

Opening the refrigerator, Jill decided on ham and cheese, when running steps culminated in a butt that sent her stumbling forward. Narrowly saving the food, Jill caught her balance and turned.

Kelsey eyed her gleefully, head lowered like a small goat. Jill restrained the urge to laugh. "No, Kelsey," she said firmly, shaking her head. "No."

He reached past her, grabbed a bit of leftover roast beef, sat down on the floor, and began to chew.

Jill reflected, not for the first time, on how much energy and education went into teaching children conventions that were basically not important. Kelsey would be as effectively nourished by his roast beef as by the ham and cheese sandwich she meant to serve him, but if he didn't learn to eat from a plate, his mental deficiency would be underlined, especially as he grew older.

This led to the depressing thought that a skilled mimic with no power of reason could fit into society more smoothly than a brilliant person who violated normal modes of behavior.

While Kelsey gnawed, Jill set the dining counter for two. She poured Kelsey a glass of milk, made sandwiches, and put them on the plates.

"Lunch," she smiled to him. "Come, Kelsey."

He looked at her blankly. "Lunch," she said again, going to the counter. "Kelsey, come."

A bit more coaxing got him into his chair. He sniffed the food, pulled the sandwich apart, and sampled the ham slice.

"Look," Jill said. She picked up her sandwich. Kelsey seized what was left of his.

"Good!" she praised. She slowly raised the sandwich to her mouth, took a small bite. Kelsey stuffed most of his bread into his mouth and helped it along with his fingers. Jill cut up the ham and showed him how to spear it on a fork. He dropped a lot but loved the new game. Jill thought it was probably the first time he had used anything

but his fingers to eat with. When he hadn't responded to Moira's or Branwen's first efforts at teaching him to feed himself, they had probably given up.

When all the ham and cheese was either tucked into Kelsey or spilled on the floor, Jill praised him again.

Kelsey laughed and picked up his glass. He handled his milk well. "Good, Kelsey," Jill said. She cleared away while Kelsey had another glass of milk.

"What are you doing?" Paul's voice demanded as she cleaned up spilled food from under the table. "The daily woman can do that kind of grubbing around!"

Jill picked up the last morsels, put them in the scrap bucket on the sink. "It's going to be messy, training Kelsey to eat at the table," she explained. "I don't mind seeing that things aren't left mucky."

"I'm not paying you to clean floors," Paul ruled.

Jill didn't argue. She just privately resolved not to leave the kitchen dirty.

How strange it was! Yesterday morning she hadn't even met Paul. Today she knew that opposition angered him and argument was useless.

"Something amuses you?" Paul asked.

Jill allowed what had been an unconscious smile on her face to broaden. "I was thinking it doesn't take long to feel at home here."

"Then you've achieved a state denied to most of the denizens." Paul's tone was wry. His dark eyes probed her as if he sensed her quietly mutinous resolve. "Where is Moira?"

"I told her I'd do better for a while alone with Kelsey," Jill said. "I can learn more about him that way."

"And what have you observed?"

"Some encouraging things. His coordination is good. He's interested in his surroundings and people. He can imitate."

Paul's mouth slanted down. "So can monkeys."

"It's early to make any predictions," Jill said coolly, angered by Paul's retort. "But I believe that Kelsey can learn to care for himself, dress, eat, the routine things—and probably acquire simple skills."

"Rug-making?" mocked Paul. "Assembly-line automaton work?"

Jill felt suddenly, inexplainably exhausted, almost defeated. Fighting to keep her voice under control, she said carefully, "I think he can be a productive human being, content and self-sufficient. To me that seems an infinite advance over vegetating regression that might eventually leave him as helpless as an infant. But perhaps you don't see it that way."

They confronted each other for a long moment. Jill half-hoped he would tell her to leave. She should get out of this house before she became enmeshed with the lives of its people, the children in the garden, unhappy Branwen, and Paul, who stirred her in a frightening, dangerous way.

Countering the instinct to run was the certainty that she could help the golden-haired child who sat watching them with a puzzled look. Paul sighed heavily.

"I'm grateful, of course, for whatever you can do. Forgive me. I know it's difficult for you when I snarl, and I'm sorry! You can't remake his brain. Is there anything you need? In the way of equipment and supplies, I mean?"

"I'll need clay and toys and I'm sure a trampoline would be good," Jill answered. "Is there a small bike around with training wheels?"

Paul had pulled out a memo pad and was making notes. "If there isn't, we'll order one. Shall we look in his room and see what he has?"

"Kelsey!" Jill called, holding out her hand.

He ran to her, but when they reached his door, the one next to Jill's, he hung back. Paul knocked. When there was no answer, he opened the door, let Jill enter first.

Kelsey wailed at something he saw and rushed past Jill, hurled himself on a big teddy bear whose slashed throat spilled out bits of foam rubber stuffing. As the child sobbed in awful despair, Jill stared in numb shock around the cluttered room. It seemed to her that mutilated toy bunnies, pandas, and animals lay everywhere. Even Paul gasped.

Jill ran forward, dropped on her knees by the mourning little boy. Who could have done this dreadful thing? Who would dream of doing it?

SEVEN

"I'll ring for Mrs. Bascom," Paul said over Kelsey's weeping. "She can clear out this rubble. I'll have the toy shop deliver a whole new collection right away."

"That's not the same," Jill said, cuddling the sobbing child. She looked slowly about the ravaged toys. "Kelsey loves these, they're his friends."

"But they're ruined!"

"I can mend this teddy," Jill said, examining the slash. "The others look as if someone in a hurry just slashed wildly. I think they can be fixed."

"That's sweet of you, but you'll need help." Paul stepped over and pushed a buzzer by the door. "Mrs. Bascom will put our daily woman on it, and Moira can mend a couple. Branwen, I suppose, is sulking somewhere. Hadn't we better get Kelsey out of here?"

"Yes, but let's bring the teddy. I'll fix it right away. Maybe that'll reassure Kelsey enough to keep him happy till the others are done."

To Jill's surprise Paul scooped up Kelsey and the savaged bear. "Where shall I put them?"

"I've a needle and thread. Kelsey can stay in my room while I mend his creature." Following Paul, Jill added, "Why don't you put your whole armload on my bed? I can mend Teddy while Kelsey watches."

Paul brushed a kiss on her forehead, but there was no amorous intent in it. "You'll make a good mother," he said. "I'll put the women to work. Meanwhile, you make a list of what you want for Kelsey and bring it this afternoon when you join me for tea."

"I didn't know I was supposed to."

"Indeed you are! Each day at four as ever was, unless something quite unavoidable prevents it." His tone was

serious beneath the laughter. "Consider it a duty. Then, no doubt, you'll keep the appointment as conscientiously as you do the rest of your schedule!"

Damn him! thought Jill in mingled apprehension and pleasure. Then she heard him giving Mrs. Bascom crisp directions, and she added as she got her own needle, *Bless him too!*

As Jill stitched up the neck of the plush bear, she said to Kelsey, "Teddy good. See, Kelsey? Teddy good!"

"Te'y?" inquired the boy, patting his stuffed companion anxiously. It was the first time Jill had heard him try to form a word.

"Teddy all right," Jill assured him.

She didn't know how much Kelsey understood, but her tone made him brighten. He fingered the smooth joining she had made, peering to watch the needle move in and out.

"Te'y!" he murmured and hugged the bear's fat tummy to his cheek.

Even as she worked, Jill's professional mind appraised the child she wanted so much to help. He wasn't deaf, nor was he mute. Simply talking to him in short sentences, using much repetition, should help him develop a workable vocabulary. Probably no one talked to him. That was an important thing Moira and Branwen could do in their time alone with Kelsey.

When Teddy looked good as ever, Jill let Kelsey hold him and then opened the door. "Kelsey, come," she said.

Kelsey ran along the corridor with her. To Jill's relief he passed his door without seeming to remember the wreckage inside. Moira's voice came dimly, followed by Mrs. Bascom's hearty tones.

By the time Kelsey saw his toys again, they should show no sign of what had happened to them. *But who did it?* Who could conceivably be so malicious, so senselessly cruel to a retarded child?

Coldness went through Jill, closed around her heart. She had been too concerned with Kelsey to spare much thought about the incredible happening, but now she had

to face the knowledge that someone had really slashed a small boy's toys—someone with access to the house.

Such a person would have to be dangerously warped. Now that she examined the shocking incident in a rational way, it alarmed Jill more than ever.

Hadn't Paul wondered and thought to find the offender?

Did he suspect someone he didn't want to expose? Jill determined to press him to look for the guilty one. Surely he understood that anyone who would attack toys with such fury might pick a human target next.

Jill stepped out into the garden after Kelsey. Vivian was at school. Branwen wouldn't do such a thing to her own child. Moira had been in the garden with Kelsey early in the morning. It was even possible—possible since it had happened at all—that Moira had done it in some uncontrollable rage of frustration after Jill had taken charge of Kelsey. It seemed an impossible thing for either Mrs. Bascom or her shy helper, Mrs. Nebbit, to have dreamed of.

Kelsey clutched his bear tightly. To relax him, Jill took him on her lap in the swing and drifted back and forth with him till the tenseness went out of his body and he gave her arm a contented pat.

"Sandbox, Kelsey," Jill said, leading him toward it. She sat down and began to heap the fine grains till Kelsey squatted down, still hugging his teddy, and ventured to touch the sand.

Jill made a mound. Kelsey explored the sand carefully. He began to sift it though his fingers, push it in rough curves.

Soon he had dropped his bear and was laughing as he played. He was learning that he could change this fascinating substance, make it into different shapes and patterns.

At teatime Moira hustled down. "Gracious me, now aren't you having a grand time!" she exclaimed to Kelsey. She spoke under her breath to Jill. "The toys are all fixed, Miss Underwood. What a sight! Wait till Mr. Regier finds out who did it! And who could have been so beastly?"

Moira seemed so absolutely aghast that Jill couldn't think her her guilty of the cruel act.

"It's hard to imagine anyone doing such a thing," Jill said. "Fortunately, now that the toys are mended, Kelsey probably won't remember they were mutilated."

The nannie scooped Kelsey up. "My poor lamb!" she said, nuzzling him. "I'll wash you up for tea. Good day to you, miss! I understand you'll have tea with Mr. Regier."

Jill felt her face warm. "Mr. Regier is very interested in Kelsey's development," she said primly. "Won't Mrs. Regier be there?"

"Not likely," Moira said. She marched off, shoulders stiff.

Stung, Jill told herself that Moira's loyalty to her moody mistress and quite understandable worry about having her own authority as nannie usurped were bound to cause a little initial discomfort. Jill dusted off her hands and left the garden.

Paul looked up from a desk that was in order but clearly full of work, set a weight on the papers he was studying, and came around to Jill.

Strange, how he could block out everything else for Jill. Easy to understand that women waited for him long after he finished with them. He pressed a buzzer by the side door and settled Jill in a chair by the fireplace. Did his hands linger an unnerving moment on her shoulders, or was she wishing that they would?

Impossible, Jill scolded herself. *Impossible, forbidden . . .*

"And how is it upstairs?" he asked.

"The animals are mended. Kelsey's happy. But—" She halted, unable to go on.

"But?" he prompted.

"Who can have done it?"

His shrug was almost a hunching-forward of massive shoulders. "Lots of people come and go here. It may be better to forget it than stir up a big row."

"You can't really think that!"

Long, graceful fingers fitted into an arch on which he rested his chin. "What should I do then? Call the constabulary to investigate the cut throats of a dozen stuffed animals?"

"It might be better than calling them to inquire over a slit human throat!"

"Good Lord!" His amused gaze assessed and embraced her. "What other melodramatic thoughts churn beneath your prim, proper, prosaic exterior?"

Hurt, she bit her tongue to keep from blurting out that his wife had been poking about her room last night. "You know it's not a laughing matter," she charged. "Moira's angry and upset. And I hate to think what Mrs. Regier feels!"

"Moira may have done it herself."

"Why?"

Mrs. Bascom brought in the tea, greeted Jill with an excited glance. She was clearly longing to know more about the furor upstairs. After she swished out in a billow of green pleats and Jill had poured tea, Paul took his cup and leaned back.

"Moira craves a bit of a stir now and then," he reflected. "Life's pretty dull here for a lusty unmarried woman who's above laborers but not gentle folk."

Was that how he would classify Jill? Probably. Betwixt and between.

Jill forced herself to take a calming sip of tea. "Moira loves Kelsey! I don't believe for a second that she'd consciously do anything to hurt him."

"But unconsciously?"

Jill didn't answer.

"What am I to do?" demanded Paul in exasperation. "Grill everyone at Dragon's Mount? Hold an inquisition?"

Catching her breath, Jill remembered Kelsey's grief and couldn't keep anger from trembling in her voice. "I think you must have lively suspicions of someone, or you'd be more upset!"

"Indeed?" Paul's tone was rich with sarcasm. "While you're being perceptive, will you be good enough to tell me whom I suspect?"

"It would be presumptuous for me to pretend to know your household better than you," Jill said at last, for in truth, she had no suspect, just a certainty that whoever would do such a thing was not safe on the loose. "I can

only plead with you not to dismiss it as a prank or a bid for attention from Moira."

"I'll look into it." Paul's face gentled, and his voice turned plaintive. "Now won't you give me another cup of tea along with that memo pad I see sticking out of your pocket?"

Jill had to laugh and comply. As she handed Paul the list, his fingers closed on hers, warm and strong.

"Don't let my growls put you off," he said. "Keep talking until I listen."

"I'm likely to shout if you ignore me too long."

Why was her throat so tight that her words, meant to sound light and casual, should have a breathless sound?

"I could never do that!"

The door flung open on those words. Jill sat back hurriedly, but not fast enough to elude Branwen's furious eyes.

EIGHT

It was not at Jill, however, that Branwen's fury was directed as she marched into the room and confronted Paul.

"Hello, my love," he said, rising. "Do sit down! Will you have tea?"

"I loathe tea, and you know it!" Branwen spun on her heel, went to a walnut cupboard, and produced a bottle of Scotch.

With the accuracy of practice she poured herself a drink, tossed it down, and strode back to the empty fireplace, hands on her slender hips. She wore deep brown velvet pants and a jerkin with a beige buccaneer shirt. More under control now, she looked very angry, very lovely.

"I might have known you'd sit here having your infernal tea and chatting up this young woman instead of finding out who's threatening our son!"

Paul's voice was frigid as if he steeled himself to patience. "I have just asked Miss Underwood if she expects me to call the police to investigate some ripped toy animals! Really, Branwen, you're most irrational! Some child from the village—maybe that poor half-wit who rings the church bell. No real damage was done."

"No real damage!" Branwen cried indignantly.

Jill, remembering Kelsey's helpless distress, had to silently echo Branwen's challenge. Paul spread his hands.

"I don't know what you expect, my love. Am I to put Bascom on the rack? Hang the Nebbits up by the thumbs? Make trouble for the tradesmen who deliver here and perhaps get an innocent person sacked?"

Branwen trembled. "Is that all you're going to do? Consider everyone except your own poor little son?"

"I have asked Mrs. Bascom and Mrs. Nebbit if they've

seen anyone about the gallery," Paul said. "And I've told Bascom and Nebbit to keep a sharp eye open."

Branwen made a hissing sound. "I'll wager that nasty sneak Vivian did it!"

Instantly, Jill saw from Paul's fleeting, swiftly masked expression that he too believed this. "Nonsense," he ruled. "Vivian's at school."

"She could have run in long enough to do it before she left," Branwen insisted.

Paul sighed. "I'll talk to her."

Poor you! Jill thought. *You can't talk to Vivian about anything—so that she'll listen. Except with threats.*

Branwen threw back her head as if reaching a decision. Her small but prominent jaw thrust forward. "Can't we discuss the whole thing a bit more thoroughly? In private?"

It was the first time Jill had seen him hesitate, and it was only for a moment. "I'd be glad to after dinner, my dear. Right now you'll have to excuse us. We're deciding what training aids Kelsey needs."

Branwen rose. "That's right, you have three children, counting Johnny. I have only Kelsey!" She smiled at Jill with a touch of malice. "Good evening, Miss Underwood."

At the door she halted, sending her gaze fully to Paul. "I'll see you after dinner then." Soft velvet modeled her lithe body as she turned and slipped out.

Paul expelled a sigh. "Mother love, Miss Underwood! Have you noticed it's often a rod with which to beat the father?" Without waiting for an answer, he began to study Jill's list.

He asked about the value to Kelsey of a trampoline, mirrors in Kelsey's room, crawling tunnels, tilting chalkboard, a walking beam, and then listened attentively as Jill explained.

Bouncing on the trampoline would build coordination, strengthen communication between body and brain. Kelsey would see himself and other people in the mirrors, come to recognize his own face and identity.

Crawling through tunnels would teach the right and left

sides of body and brain to work together. Most retarded children had never crawled on all fours. Jill had often seen remarkable improvement stem simply from taking children through this stage in development.

The walking beam, a variation of the old game of walking on a curb or railroad track without falling off, was another excellent coordination device.

Chalkboard, clay, paints, sand—all the play materials, gave Kelsey a way to shape, form something of his own. Learning that he could make things was more important than mirrors in enhancing his self-esteem and sense of capability.

"I get the general plan," Paul had said, nodding approval after a long silent moment when she thought he might denounce the whole concept as ridiculous. "Kelsey may never be more than five years old mentally, but this may make him a bright, lively five rather than a regressing one."

"Yes. If his coordination is developed to the fullest and he has plenty of opportunity to create, he can learn simple tasks. There must be scores of things going on around Dragon's Mount that he could work at as he gets older; gardening, churning, the orchards and dairy. They could give him great satisfaction. He can be happy and productive as an adult."

Changing from acceptance to angry frustration, Paul made a rejecting motion. "All this effort and thought to let one boy hang on to the fringes of humankind!"

Jill remembered Sharon who had not lived to cling to the fringes. Tears stung her eyes. "You expect too much!" she accused, standing. "Can't you be glad for the reachable? Why must you ruin what can be attained with your hunger for the impossible?"

Blindly she turned for the door, stumbled in her haste. Paul caught her. For an instant she almost lay in his arms, heard the deep strong beat of his heart beneath her cheek.

"How can one know it's impossible unless he tries?" Paul murmured. He wasn't speaking of Kelsey.

Only a flashing thought of the woman upstairs put strength into Jill.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, gaining her feet. "That was clumsy of me!"

"Was it?" He made no move to hold her, but his soft laughter pursued her to the door.

Once out of sight, she ran across the hall and up the stairs. Breathless, she locked the door to her room and went to stand in the bay window, forehead resting on the cool glass till her mind cleared.

She sank down in the funny old recliner and gazed out toward Glastonbury. Those age-rounded hills had seen so many loves, so many griefs. They would be there, just as lovely, as serene, long after Dragon's Mount's present inhabitants lived out their fates. But positive fact could not at that moment, still the racing of Jill's blood.

Closing her eyes, she admitted that she wanted to be with Paul, taste the heady sweetness of being desired by a man of his magnetic, wholly masculine vitality. But he was married, bonded to beautiful, imperious Branwen, whom he treated with such indulgence. Branwen, who was going to be with him alone tonight, had the right to be with him all the time.

Jill pressed her hands to her eyes in a useless attempt to shut out the images filling her mind. This was no good! She must break free of him before glances and touches formed a tie that she, at least, would be held by.

As soon as she had visited Kelsey, she would get out and take a walk, perhaps even stroll toward the Smithy.

If she met Johnny, so much the better! He didn't give her a chance, during their encounters, to think of anyone else, not even Paul.

She found Kelsey in the garden. He was playing in the sandbox while Moira had a "natter" with Mrs. Nebbit. Vivian dangled one long leg from the hammock as she read from a paperback that had Henry the Eighth and one of his unfortunate wives blazoned on the cover.

"Hello, Vivian." Jill paused, deliberately making the girl acknowledge her presence. "What was interesting at school today?"

"Nothing!" Vivian retorted automatically, but when Jill

didn't move on, the black-ringed gray eyes fixed on her like those of a wild bird keeping its independent will in spite of cages. "Do you have prefects in America?

"Not that I ever heard of," said Jill. "We sometimes have student monitors who keep order."

"Well, I hate them!" Vivian hissed. "I wish they'd all get sent to Coventry!"

"Are you still really doing that?" asked Jill. Visions of isolated girls being shunned by their companions flashed through her mind.

"It happens to me all the time," said Vivian. "I might as well *live* there!"

"Well, next time some other girl gets ostracized, why don't you stay friends with her anyway? Maybe she'd side with you next time you're out of fortune."

Vivian considered. "It might work," she grudged. "But I still despise prefects! They're horrid bullies."

"I shouldn't wonder," Jill agreed.

"You're not going to tell me it's my fault?" Vivian asked with a stare of bafflement.

"Why should I? You're the one who goes to school. You know what happens. And of course you're the only person who can change your school life."

Vivian pondered. "I don't know. I'll think about it. Those prefects . . ."

"Are nasty-horrid!" Jill supplied.

Giggling, Vivian resumed her book, but her foot dipped and swayed with gayer motion. Could she have ripped her pitiful little half-brother's toys so savagely? If she had, she needed something other than the cold lecture she'd get from Paul. Jill frowned. Johnny might be the best one to talk to his sister—if anyone could!

Moira caught Jill's arm. "Well? What did Mr. Regier say?" she demanded. "Did he promise to do something?"

"He said he'd look into it. He evidently felt inquiries could cause a great deal of trouble, and he wasn't inclined to take it too seriously."

Moira sucked in her breath, shot a glance at the girl in the hammock. "That Vivian! He thinks she did it!"

Weary of being in the middle of conflicting people, feeling it important to know if Paul's suggestion might possibly be right, Jill said off-handedly, "He thought you might have."

If Moira wasn't astonished, she was a fine actress, a good deal cleverer than anyone gave her credit for being. Her gold-brown eyes widened, and her mouth crumpled. Then anger stiffened her sensuous body. Chilly calm masked her face.

"You must think us a strange household, Miss Underwood." She went back to her lounge chair near the sandbox. "Never mind. We'll learn sooner or later who did it."

"If you do, take the proof to Mr. Regier or me. Please don't try to punish whoever it was yourself, Moira!"

Moira didn't answer. Hoping to cheer her, Jill told her how interested Paul had been in the equipment for Kelsey and how he had undertaken to get it all as soon as could be.

"That's well and good," snapped Moira. "Maybe if somebody tears up a trampoline that cost a couple of hundred pounds, he'll be more concerned at catching them out!"

Jill gave up for the time. "I'll pick up Kelsey for breakfast in the morning," she said. "Good night."

She included Mrs. Nebbit in her nod and smile, paused to give Vivian's hammock a gentle swing. The girl sat upright, almost tumbling out.

"So long," Jill said. "See if you can't foil the prefects tomorrow by being either unequivocally irreproachable or irredeemably, flagrantly, joyously untrammeled!"

Vivian blinked. "Say that again!"

"I can't," laughed Jill. "But I'll bet you can remember it if you try!"

"Un-e-quiv-o-cally ir-re-proach-able!" Vivian triumphed. "Flagrantly, joyously un-un-untrammeled! Got it, didn't I?"

"Full marks!"

"I like it." Vivian showed the book she was now devouring, having apparently finished the paperback. "It

sounds like what the man says here about going to heaven. 'But I would rather go to hell, for to hell go all the fair and gallant ladies . . .' "

"And I imagine they went to Coventry in their school days," Jill teased. Again she noticed tangles in the child's long black hair. "Why don't you come to my room with your hair brush before you go to bed tonight?" she suggested. "I could work out some of those elf locks."

"I brushed my hair this morning!"

Jill repressed a smile. "I'm sure you did. But your hair's wonderfully thick and fine. It must be hard to reach the back. I used to do my little sister's hair."

"Really? Was it long as mine?"

"No, you vain creature!"

"Is she old enough to do it by herself now?"

"She died," Jill said, turning away with the stab of pain she thought she would always feel in remembering Sharon.

A small grubby hand with long, unclean fingernails crept into Jill's. "I'm sorry," Vivian whispered huskily. "I go to bed at nine. Is that too early to come along?"

"Not at all." Jill gave Vivian's hand a quick squeeze. "See you then," she said and left the garden.

True to her resolve to get clear of Paul's immediate influence, Jill stopped in her room just long enough to catch up her handwoven yellow shawl. Once in the central hall she decided she should stop at the kitchen and tell Mrs. Bascom that she'd forage for a snack when she got hungry. Paul hadn't invited her to dinner that night. Route decided, Jill went through the arch, found no one in the airy kitchen, and left a note.

Outside, Jill passed the garden, its warm bricks aglow with the slanting western sun, and loitered through the orchards with their fresh smell of high grass and young apples rounding.

Her spirit calmed as it usually did when she was alone in sun and breeze with grass soft underfoot and a bright sky closing down to gentle green horizons. She was almost level with the summer pavilion when she heard voices.

"We can't do it!" Was that Johnny's voice, urgent and pleading! "It would just bring pain and trouble to everyone!"

"It's the only way." The woman's voice was so soft that Jill could scarcely hear it.

"I tell you, it's impossible!"

"Is there someone else?" The woman's tone raised. "There must be! In seven years . . ."

Concealed by the walls and heavy twisting vines, Jill knew she must go on quickly. But she couldn't move fast enough to avoid Johnny's answer. "What was between us ended when you married, Elin. I came back because I have to know what really happened. Even if my mother did go off with a lover, it's strange she's never written to me or Vivian—that she just vanished."

Jill set her hands over her ears and almost ran away. Eavesdroppers seldom hear anything they want to know! Was Johnny in love with Elin, Wayland's young wife? Was that why he had stayed away for so long? And what would come of his desire to know the facts of his mother's desertion?

The lives at Dragon's Mount were a tangled web, woven with hate-tempered strands. Jill knew she must keep clear of them or her own life would enter the snarled pattern that centered about Paul. Could he possibly have driven his first wife away in order to marry Branwen? If so, he had reaped a tragic harvest. Small wonder that he toyed with the idea of happiness elsewhere.

Where better find a bit of light diversion than with an employee? Jill burned with humiliation, revulsion, at her response to him.

Best to go away! But Kelsey? Vivian?

As the one person thus far free of the tortured complex that Paul dominated, she might help them, each child beset with such different but crushing problems. Everything in her rebelled at giving up, deserting Kelsey and Vivian.

Surely she wasn't so weak and silly that she'd nurse an infatuation for Paul which could only ruin her effectiveness! She was forewarned, forearmed!

Reaching the oaks, she pulled her shawl snuggly about her. How still it seemed among the giant trees with their branches so thick that only tiny spangles of light sifted through. There was not even a rustle of leaves, for last winter's had fallen to soft mulch underfoot.

Primroses and violets grew in bright clumps. Jill sank down on a grassy bank. The oaks were a zone of ancient quiet between the main estate and the Smithy. It seemed that anyone who passed through them should be more peaceful, more serene of mind. She took a deep breath and leaned back against a trunk that might have been young when Henry the Eighth dissolved Glastonbury Abbey and the Tor was destroyed except for the lone tower she saw from her window.

A bit of bark struck her trouser leg. She sat up, heart thudding. Johnny smiled at her.

" 'Oh, where are you going, my pretty lady?' " he sang and sat down at her feet.

NINE

"What were you dreaming of?" he asked.

She was too startled to answer. Johnny laughed, settling more comfortably. "I know my voice isn't good, Miss Underwood, but it can't have shocked you into muteness."

"I—I thought I'd walk to the Smithy," Jill said. "It was so restful here that I decided to enjoy it."

His blue eyes scanned her sharply. "Have you been here long?"

He must wonder if she had passed near the pavilion and heard him with Elin. "A little while," Jill said. She glanced at her watch. "Goodness, I'd better hurry!" She jumped up. Johnny rose also.

"Why?" he demanded. His scowl was exactly like his father's. "You aren't making dinner with Paul a routine, I hope?"

"Oh no, it's not that! I just want to get home before dark."

"It won't be dark for hours," Johnny reminded her. "This is English summer, remember?" He grinned and caught her hand, taking her along with him off the main path. "There's a sight you've got to see, Miss Underwood! Not many of its kind in all England."

"What?" She was breathless, trying to keep up with his long stride.

"Never mind, just come along like a good girl!"

Now that he was willing to leave the whys of their chance meeting alone, Jill contrarily was not. "Where were *you* going?" she asked.

"I was going to the Smithy. Invited for dinner. Why don't you join me? Elin won't mind putting on another plate."

Wayland had invited Jill to come sometime, and Jill burned with curiosity about Elin after hearing her exchange with Johnny, though she half-feared meeting her. It was hard for an average, run-of-the-mill woman to stand alongside one who, from all Jill heard, must be extraordinarily lovely and bewitching. Well? Jill told herself she could only be what she was and do her best at it.

Throwing back her head as she hurried to keep up with Johnny, Jill said, "I'd like to come if you're sure it's all right."

"Of course it is! Elin's as curious about you as you are about her."

That gave Jill some confidence. She felt more as if she were going to meet a woman, not some fairy or reincarnate Pictish queen.

"How far is this wonder of wonders you want to show me?" she asked. "I have to be home by nine."

He shot her a side glance. "That's a strange hour for an appointment."

"Perhaps." Apart from her activities being no business of his, Jill was perversely moved not to explain that at nine she was supposed to brush tangles from Vivian's fall of long black hair. "Nevertheless, I have one. Now where . . . ?"

"Here."

Johnny's hands on her shoulders checked her at the edge of a glade. Jill caught in her breath.

The whole grassy basin was a mass of proud, delicate white blooms rising on slender stems out of spear-shaped leaves that swayed gently in their shielded place. Lilies of the valley, thousands of them! Growing here in the deep oak forest, they had a special glory, looking as different from domesticated flowers as wild deer in a copse look from caged deer.

"Marvelous!" she whispered. "How did they get here?"

"Monks planted them long ago, centuries past, while there was still an abbot at Glastonbury." Johnny glowed at left like this in the whole country."

her delight. "There are probably not half a dozen places

"It's surprising that people aren't always coming to look."

"Oh, the country folk hereabout often do, but tourists never learn of it. Just as well, since there's a tricky bog on the other side." He turned with a wry chuckle. "Tourists would doubtless rather visit the formal gardens of the great estates, anyway."

"Nothing could be lovelier than this!"

"Then I was right to bring you." He seemed boyishly pleased with himself, standing back to watch her as she admired the glade of flowers. "It's one of Elin's favorite places."

Elin. Did Johnny's thoughts always come back to her? Jill brought her shawl closer about her shoulders, suddenly chilled. It was growing dusky in the forest; the lilies seemed ghost blooms.

"Are you sure it's all right for me to just turn up for a meal?" Jill asked.

"Provided we're not late!" Johnny spun her around, laughing, and towed her off again.

They stepped out of the oaks. Jill blinked. What must be the Smithy was right in front of them, a stone cottage with the roof dipping thatch at different levels, so that windows peered out like random eyes.

A giant chestnut in full pink blossom ruled the front yard, but a dainty little wych elm, its boughs weeping to the ground, made a welcome by the door.

Beyond a generous spread of grass scattered with outbuildings ran a stone wall. Through its broad, spike-topped steel gate Jill saw white cattle, knew they must be the famous herd.

No shadow of Paul stretched here. The oak forest was a magic zone between Dragon's Mount and the Smithy.

"It's a different world!" Jill murmured to Johnny.

He nodded. "Here Wayland rules his forge, accepting only commissions that interest him, as his forefathers did back to the days when working in metal was thought a skill of gods or near-gods at least. And Elin plays with the park cattle as Cretan dancers pranked with their bulls.

Her blood runs back to those wanderers who brought the maze dance and worship of the earth mother to this island long before the Romans came."

"You think the Picts were from Crete?"

"Perhaps. I certainly think they came from somewhere in the Greek or Minoan sphere. Their language was nothing like Germanic tongues or the Celtic."

A curly black head thrust out of the shelter beyond the house. "So you've brought our new young lady!" Wayland greeted. "Go right in, do! I'll be in as soon as I wash up."

Johnny tapped and entered, holding the battered door for Jill. "Elin!" he called. "I've brought you another mouth to feed!"

"It's a prettier mouth than yours anyway!" retorted the girl who peeked out of the kitchen. Her eyes were red, but she managed a smile as she cast a quick sharp glance over Jill. "Excuse me, the fish are burning!"

"Isn't something always?" chaffed Johnny.

"Come on back!" urged Elin, voice sepulchral from the distance. "If I leave these accursed sole for a minute, they start shriveling!"

"Dump sauce over them, love, as I'm sure you already mean to do," Johnny counseled. "That takes care of the scorch!"

What a contrast this matter-of-fact banter was to the tormented snatch of argument Jill had overheard near the pavilion!

Johnny steered Jill out of the small parlor with its two easy chairs before the fireplace, tea table, and needlepoint-covered settee. The kitchen was large, taking up the rest of the bottom floor. Stairs at the rear led to what had to be the bedroom.

Amazingly the kitchen appliances were electric and modern. Elin tended a frying pan on the front ring of a small range, though the fireplace next to it still looked ready for service, with its hanging pot and burnished copper on the mantel. An electric toaster and percolator stood on a tile-topped work cabinet that ran the length of the cooking area.

The rest of the room was clearly where the couple spent

most of their time indoors. A cushioned window seat faced the oaks. Next to it was another fireplace. A great horn, bound in silver, reared on the mantel, held by a silver brace. The chairs showed wear and the settled imprint of bodies.

In the middle of the big room, with its sparkling white-washed walls set off by stained timbers, was a trestle table. Rush-bottomed chairs were pulled up to it, and three places laid.

Whistling, Johnny crossed to a huge Welsh cupboard, got a plate and silverware for Jill.

"Thanks," Elin said over her shoulder. "Put on whatever you want to drink and then introduce us properly!"

"Beer?" Johnny asked Jill. "Cider? Mead?"

"Mead?" echoed Jill, recalling tales of savage, mead-drinking warriors. "Surely that's not around these days!"

"We make it ourselves," Elin tossed back. "Malt, honey, yeast, and water. Wayland and I always have it with supper."

"I couldn't forgive myself if I didn't try it!" Jill laughed.

She helped Johnny fill the mugs from an earthenware jug. Elin got an orange-colored casserole out of the oven and put it in the center of the table. Even in her rush, she moved like a trained dancer, gracefully, with an economy of motion, her turning to Jill a pirouette.

Light woman, Jill thought. *Light girl!*

She was thinking not of Elin's morals but of her body and nature. Green eyes slanted upward in a witching face with a pointed chin. Wheat-colored hair, varied in shading from white-gold to brown, was caught back and tied with a thong of leather.

She wore a close-fitting knit shirt the purplish-brown color of heather, with plum denim Levis, and her slim, tanned feet looked fragile in sandals whose tops were shaped like leaves.

Somehow she managed to seem both tough and delicate at once, like a pliant willow stayed by every breeze, but springing upright when they passed. She was so fine-boned that Jill nearly believed her bones were hollow like a bird's, filled with living, changing air.

"Johnny's told me about you," Elin said, smiling. "I was jealous, but now I'm not. You're a good person."

She put out her hand. Jill clasped it, finding the fingers strong, slender, cool. A bit piqued, she couldn't help asking, "You're not jealous of 'good' people?"

Elin laughed merrily, whirling back to the stove. "I can't say exactly what I mean!" She tilted her head on one side as she whipped potatoes into creamy peaks. "I only know there will be no quarrel between you and me."

Her smile was so infectious that Jill had to give it back, though she wondered if Elin's tolerance was based on deciding that she, Jill, was not a threat, could not challenge Elin's hold on whatever men she chose.

Had she irrevocably chosen Johnny? Was he still in love with her? Did Wayland sense it?

"Elin," he cajoled, "do, please, turn off the heat under those fish and show Jill the cattle."

The girl switched off the stove with the speed of a mother invited to show off her children, thrust a handful of sugar lumps into her apron, and led the way out to the gate.

"You'd best stay this side," she warned, climbing over. "Wayland is the only other human they'll allow in the field."

"They can be ferocious," Johnny told Jill. "In my grandfather's time they gored a hunter, and he was far from the first. Some were sent to a zoo once, and when one was shipped back, his old herdmates killed him."

"But they are so beautiful!" Jill breathed, gazing at the score or so of creamy white cattle.

The herd grazed in a large clearing among giant oaks and chestnuts. They had longish bodies with high shoulders and thick, massive chests.

"Fascinating creatures," Johnny commented. "The aurochs, or wild ox, that ranged over Europe and fought in the arenas in Rome. Tacitus called them *bos taurus*. No colored calves have ever been born into this herd from the time records were first kept in 1240."

Horns curved like crescent moons, two magnificent bulls raised their heads, snuffing, and advanced toward

Elin. Jill caught Johnny's arm. "Are you sure they won't hurt her?"

"They love her. She's played with them since they were tiny."

All the same, Jill scarcely breathed while Elin patted the black muzzles, whispered into the reddish insides of their ears, kissed each animal between its crescent-shaped, black-tipped horns, and climbed back over the gate.

"Do you like my pets?" she laughed.

"They're fantastic," Jill said. She wanted to add, *So are you!* But wasn't sure how Elin would take it. Back in the house Elin went to her cooking, frowning in such concentration that no one would have taken her for the girl who had just played with the white bulls of pure, ancient lineage.

Wayland came in then like a gusty wind. He kissed Elin on the lips, pulling her close in spite of company, and stumped over to shake Jill's hand.

"So here you are! Welcome to the Smithy." He wrinkled his nose. "Mead's poured, and the fish just a shade more than done, eh, my love?"

"There's sauce to cover them," scowled Elin, deftly serving out portions of sole.

To Jill's taste the sauce, with its tang of rosemary and tarragon, more than made up for any toughness of the fish. The casserole was an aromatic stew of leeks, carrots, and a squashlike vegetable Elin identified as marrow. A platter of water cress, black olives, and fresh red tomatoes completed the meal.

"How are you getting on at the big house?" Wayland asked after he had eaten one helping of everything and dished up seconds.

"It's early to say," Jill said evasively. "But I'm sure Kelsey can develop much more than he has."

Elin sniffed. "Heaven help you with Branwen and Moira! They'd turn a normal child into a problem! How did you find Vivian, Johnny?"

"Thorny," he said with a rueful shrug. "She can't be faulted, after all, for not welcoming a brother who left when she was three!"

"Don't rush her," Elin advised. "She must feel stranded there, rather. How do you get on with her, Jill?"

Was this the time to mention Kelsey's ravaged toys? Jill decided not. It seemed a treachery, however well intended, to the lonely, willful young girl Jill would be meeting in a few hours.

"We've got to the joking stage," Jill said. "But I think it will take time for Vivian to trust anyone."

Johnny turned the subject. "Miss Underwood's fascinated with what a mixed-up lot the English are, Wayland. Can you tell her more about us?"

"Easy done for you, lad," said Wayland with a glint of friendly malice in his dark eyes. "You're Saxon crossed Norman. I'm a Celt."

"Which means?" prodded Johnny.

"Who knows exactly? Before time was written down, we worshipped the sky god Indra, drifted over Europe with our covered wagons and fine cattle. Celtic blood is strong in the Scottish Highlands, in Wales, Ireland, and Brittany. We fought the Saxons when they came, but we both suffered the Danes, and then came you Normans under William. But all of us were the sky god's men, Jutes, Danes, Saxons, Angles, Celts. Only Picts belonged to the earth mother."

"I would like to have seen those times," Elin dreamed, eyes half-shut. "I would have been the Barley Queen and danced in mazes with the Green Man who was King of the Wood so that the crops would grow."

"But the Green Man died each year, Elin," Wayland pointed out. "You wouldn't like that, you who turn rabbits out of snares till the gardeners are ever cursing us!"

"I suppose not," she laughed, shrugging. "You can have your pick of legends, Miss Underwood. Some ancestor of Johnny's killed a dragon on the hill where the house stands. And Wayland's namesake was a smith also, who loved a swan maiden. When she deserted him, he went seeking her. He fell prisoner to a king who lamed him so he couldn't run off and set him to work on an island.

"This Wayland made fabulous jewelry and weapons. When the king's sons came for their wonderful swords, he

killed them and set their eyes for jewels in a brooch for their mother and made a magnificent cup from the skull of one, which he sent as a gift to the king.

"When the princes never came home, the king went to the island, but his prisoner had made wings and flown away."

"Did he ever find his swan maiden?" Jill asked.

"I don't know," Wayland answered.

His gaze rested on Elin with the wondering intentness of a man who had his heart's desire but couldn't believe it and had to keep looking to be sure.

What would he do if she left him? He was old enough and perhaps indulgent enough to forgive a lover, but from the rapt way he watched Elin, the loss of her would destroy him.

"There's not much we can say about Wayland or Volund the Smith," Johnny said. "But once he was better known than Robin Hood. He belongs to England's heathen past, like Bran the Blessed."

"I never heard of him," Jill admitted. And to think she had prided herself on a fair acquaintance with *Beowulf* and Shakespeare!

Wayland lit his pipe, took a short, strong pull. "Now there was a hero for you! After his last battle, when he and his men defeated the High King of Ireland, the dying Bran told his sister and brother to cut off his head and carry it back to England. They did as he told them, burying the head near where the Tower of London now stands, for as long as his head faced the continent, no invasion from there would be successful."

"The magic must not have worked," said Jill, remembering Danes and Normans."

"Arthur dug it up." Wayland might have been speaking of a troublesome neighbor. "He wanted to defend England himself with no credit to Bran."

Elin's green eyes were lit with golden points in the dimming room. She smiled dreamily. "Bran had a sister, for whom he warred with Ireland. Branwen. Branwen of the White Breast."

At this moment Branwen must be with Paul. And her

breasts, judging from the rest of her, must be as lovely as any legendary beauty's. Jill pushed back her chair.

"I must be getting home, but please let me help with the dishes first."

"How nice of you!" smiled Elin slipping into her part of housewife as a child skips behind a hiding pillar. "I'll clear away while you wash and Johnny dries."

"And I'll turn on the light so you can see what you're doing," growled Wayland, clumping to the switch.

Fifteen minutes later the kitchen was spic and span. "I'll walk you home," said Johnny to Jill.

"It's not necessary."

Johnny grinned. "The forest will be pitch dark, Little Red Riding Hood!"

"Even I don't walk there alone at night," said Elin. But she didn't seem enthusiastic at the thought of her one-time love escorting Jill. "You *will* come back for a while, won't you, Johnny?"

"He takes you, or I'll drive you in the bus," ruled Wayland who was carving something from a slab of wood. "He can still come back and drink mead for an hour."

Jill threw up her hands. "All right! But only to the other edge of the woods! She turned to Elin. "Thank you for a delicious meal. I've had a wonderful time!"

"Come often." Elin gave her a swift kiss on the cheek. "Sunday I'll dance with our cattle. I'd like for you to be here."

"If I possibly can, I will," Jill promised.

Wayland limped to the door with his guests. "Don't let this rogue one get you lost in the trees," he cautioned, shaking her hand with his rough, brawny one. "He's a great lad for chasing fox fire and will-o'-the-wisps!"

"Are you?" asked Jill once they had rounded the cottage. There was plenty of light in the open, but the great oak trees loomed very dark.

"Am I what?"

"A chaser of the will-o'-the-wisps?"

He shot her one of those quick side glances, and his jaw hardened. "Not often. Mostly I'm a prosaic counselor on how to span a chasm or the best place to impound water."

"And when you aren't?"

"I walk pretty girls home. And sometimes take them on excursions along old dragon trails."

"The route we'll go Saturday?"

"That's the main one."

They were in the forest. It was very dark. Jill was glad when Johnny took her hand. The night seemed less haunted. She moved with more confidence. Which dissolved as Johnny swung her about, bringing her to a stop with both hands on her shoulders.

TEN

His fingers dug almost hurtfully into her flesh. "Who are you meeting at nine?"

Angry and startled, she didn't answer. He gave her a slight, controlled shake. "Tell me, Miss Underwood, or you're going to miss your rendezvous!"

The contrast between his bullying and his polite form of address sent Jill into almost hysterical laughter. Then she grew icily furious.

"You must be proud of yourself! Chivalrously seeing me through the forest—and waylaying me with questions that are none of your affair!"

"I need to know," he insisted.

She brought her foot down as hard as she could on his, wrenched free in his moment of pained shock, and ran. She couldn't outrace him. Veering from the path, she groped her way under a bush. He had heard her though.

"Don't be soft!" Companionably enough, he dropped down beside her. "I'm not going to hurt you. If you'll tell me the truth, maybe I can save you some grief."

"Don't do me any favors," she breathed, much discomfited as he helped her into a sitting position.

He shrugged. "You aren't going a step till I know."

"Damn you!"

"All you like." He settled against a tree. "I'd as soon sit here all night as not."

Jill believed him. She fought an inner struggle. It would be terrible to disappoint Vivian, give the child one more grudge against people. Did it matter if Johnny knew?

"All right!" she said. "Vivian's coming to my room so I can brush her hair. She has to go to bed at nine. Now, is there anything else you want to know?"

"Vivian!" Johnny whistled, rising and giving Jill a

hand. "That's jolly good of you after putting in a day with Kelsey."

"I'm glad that you approve." Jill made her tone as cutting as she could, marched back to the path.

Johnny caught her arm again. "Relax!" he urged as she went stiff. "I do most humbly beg your pardon."

Still ruffled, Jill wouldn't answer.

"Pretty please with sugar, cream, and all your favorite fruits?" Johnny's overdone contrition was as annoying as his previous high-handedness. But Jill had to laugh in spite of herself.

"Oh, Johnny, stop!"

"You do forgive me?"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

He said plaintively, "I'm not ridiculous, I'm worried! You will come with me Saturday, won't you?"

Jill hesitated. An impression of Branwen and Paul as they might be at that exact moment flashed through her mind. It brought a stabbing pang that made Jill firm to her resolve to find an antidote for Paul. And what better remedy than a day roaming with Johnny a good distance from Dragon's Mount?

"How can I be sure you won't start another inquisition?" she asked.

"Don't mention mysterious assignations."

"You're not my keeper!"

"I feel I should be," he said with a touch of rue. "Not only are you a stranger in a strange land, but you're a stranger in my father's very strange house. Maybe it's thick of me, but I feel responsible."

"You needn't," Jill said crisply. They had reached the edge of the wood. "And you needn't come any further, thank you."

He caught her hands. "It really is Vivian you're going to meet?"

"For heaven's sake! Of course it is!"

"Good. I'll wait here till I see a light go on in your room. And in case you ever need me any other time, I'm using the turret room down the hall from the upstairs kitchen and lounge. My mother's room, it used to be. She

loved to weave and had her loom near the turret window. I used to think she was like the Lady of Shalott."

And what did you think when she ran away with her Frenchman? It must have eaten at you terribly all these years, for you to come back now and try to prove she didn't desert her home and family. But if she didn't, what happened to her?

Jill remembered Kelsey's ripped toys, Branwen hiding in her room last night. A chill went through her.

"Why should I need you? If you think there's some kind of danger, you should tell me straight out!"

His hands dropped hers, fixed tight on her shoulders. "The best words of warning I know are: don't fall in love with Paul!"

"Because of Branwen?"

"Partly. Mostly because of him. He's had many women, but he's never made any of them happy."

When Jill didn't answer, Johnny pushed up her face as if he could see her expression in the dark. "I can almost hear you!" he said violently. "You're thinking: *'But with me it would be different!'* Damn him, that's what he always makes a woman believe!"

Johnny bent his head. His mouth took Jill's, bruising hard. He held her against him till she felt the taut length of his body. She had never been kissed like this before, never known such confusion and tumult of the senses.

At last he let her go. They faced each other, breathless, exhausted, like two adversaries.

"Why did you do that?" she cried. "Why?"

"I suppose," he said with a brutal laugh, "that I wanted to get your full attention! Now hurry home, it's minutes till nine! And flash your light if you need me."

Need him? What she needed was someone to protect her from him—his prying questions, strong hands, ruthless mouth! Too angry and shaken to speak, she whirled and ran.

Vivian waited by Jill's door, looking like a small, solemn specter in her long white cotton gown with drawstring

sleeves and neck. When she saw Jill, she didn't smile, but her eyes shone.

"I thought you'd forgotten," she greeted.

"I wouldn't do that."

Jill opened the door, switched on the light, and gave a quick glance around before she moved on into the room. Johnny, if he were still watching, could now go back to the Smithy with a clear mind. "It just took me longer to get home than I expected. Here, sit on the edge of the bed and let's get those tangles out!"

It took twenty minutes to work the glossy black hair free of snarls. Vivian grimaced and scrunched her shoulders together but made no complaint. Jill wondered who had brushed her hair till she got old enough to at least try it herself. Mrs. Nebbit, probably, or Mrs. Bascom. It was pretty obvious that Branwen hadn't.

"Do you wash your own hair?" Jill asked.

Vivian nodded. "It's terribly hard! Mrs. Bascom says it ought to squeak when it's all clean and rinsed." Dismally the girl concluded, "Mine never *squeaks!*"

"It's lovely thick hair, but I'll bet it is hard to shampoo," sympathized Jill. "Next time, why don't you let me help? I have some creme rinse that should tame it down a bit and make it easier to brush out."

"Do you? Oh, that would be super!"

The girl didn't snuggle up, but she let herself lean against Jill instead of maintaining her rigidly independent position. They chatted about Vivian's headmistress, trials with Mademoiselle, the French teacher, the evils of bossy prefects, and what the future held for a girl who was "rotten at sports and I detest 'em anyway!"

Jill plaited Vivian's hair in a single plump braid. "There, that'll keep it from tangling in the night!" said Jill, handing back the brush. "Run along now or you'll oversleep in the morning."

"Thanks awfully, Miss Underwood!"

"It was my pleasure. And I'd like you to call me Jill."

"Oh, super!" Vivian's face glowed. She paused at the door. "You're sure about the creme rinse? It won't be too much trouble?"

"Of course not," Jill assured her. "I'll enjoy it. My time with Kelsey is over at tea."

Vivian went rigid. Her eyes veiled. "That's right," she said carefully in a funny little voice. "You are here for Kelsey, aren't you? I get his sort of leftovers."

"I am most definitely not to be compared to warmed-up shepherd's pie!" Jill said, trying to joke the girl back into her former happiness.

When Vivian only stared, Jill tried sharpness. "I'm sure Kelsey would be only too glad to trade with you if he could," she scolded. "You'll grow up, be able to go out in the world, and do what you choose! Kelsey will never have a choice."

"But he has his mother," Vivian cried. Her face twisted. "And now he has you! It—it isn't fair!"

"Vivian!"

But she had already rushed out of the room. The door slammed so hard it bounced open again. Jill started to follow, then checked.

Time and behavior, not words, were needed to build trust in Vivian, convince her that she was lovable and, what was more important, develop in the child's frozen heart a capacity to love.

Crossing slowly to the door, Jill started to close it. As it swung shut, she caught a glimpse of the hall below. In the doorway of Paul's study he and Branwen were locked in an embrace.

Hand going to her throat in a sticken gesture, Jill muted the sound of her door closing. She had known, hadn't she?

Yes. She just hadn't realized how deeply Paul had already possessed her imagination. He and Branwen were married. It was good for them to show love for each other. But could Branwen really love anyone? And what, exactly, did Johnny think had happened to his mother?

A sharp headache hammered in Jill's temples. She took two aspirin, slipped out of her clothes into a robe.

Much too early for bed.

What was she going to do with the long evenings here?

The prospect of several lonely hours each night loomed as an unendurable condition.

Tomorrow you must lay in a good stock of books from the library, Jill told herself sternly. *As for tonight—you owe a dozen letters, don't you?*

She owed ten, to be exact. Settling at the polished desk, she wrote her parents a long letter, saying nothing about her personal tumult, of course, and dashed off a half-dozen notes to friends.

They all seemed so far away. This was her second night at Dragon's Mount, yet it seemed she had been here for years. It was close to midnight when Jill addressed the envelopes, stretched, and gratefully realized that she was sleepy.

When Jill went down to the garden next morning, Mr. Bascom was finishing the walking beam. It ran the entire length of the garden.

Over by the sandbox Branwen sat with her embroidery. As she returned Jill's greeting, her up-lifted face had a wan but triumphant look. Kelsey was dabbling in the pool. At the sight of Jill he jumped up and ran to her. Branwen caught his wrist.

"One thing you'd better understand, Miss Underwood! Kelsey's mine! I won't send him off to some wretched institution, nor will I give him to you!"

Amazed, Jill stared at the other woman. "You can't 'give' people, Mrs. Regier. Nor can you own them!"

"You're paid to train my son, Miss Underwood, not to argue. I advise you to get on with your work." Branwen caught Kelsey to her and hugged him, rocking back and forth. "I'm sorry, my lamb! You know Mummy loves you! Now run on with your teacher!"

Jill moved away from Kelsey, shocked and troubled. Whatever peace Branwen had made with Paul obviously came dear, eroding her calm and self-respect. Certainly her hysterical possessiveness could only harm her son.

There's nothing you can do about it, Jill warned herself.

Jill helped Kelsey up on the beam, held him under one elbow. He shuffled along nervously at first, frequently slipping half off the board, but when he learned that his supporter wouldn't let him fall, he stepped with more confidence and crowed with pleasure when he could bring one foot directly in front of the other.

When he tired of the beam, they moved to the sand box and played till noon. Branwen had long since gone inside. To Jill's relief she was not in the upstairs dining room or kitchen.

Lunch was a buffet of cold meat, cheese, relishes and biscuits, with carafes of cold milk and hot coffee. Moira was already sitting at the refectory table in the dining room, brooding over Caerphilly and summer sausage.

Jill hesitated between eating in the kitchen where Kelsey might concentrate more on his utensils and sitting at the table. Kelsey decided for her. He scooted a chair up beside his nannie, who beamed at him and gave him a hug.

Hastily filling their plates, Jill put Kelsey's before him and sat opposite. He started cramming hunks of chicken into his mouth. Jill picked up her fork.

"Kelsey," she said. "Look."

Kelsey grappled with his fork, speared some chicken, and beamed when Jill applauded. "Good, Kelsey! That's good!"

"Oh, God!" Flinging her arm across her face, Moira pushed herself back from the table and fled.

Shaken, Jill wondered if she should follow but decided it might do more harm than good. If either Moira or Branwen had been patient enough to persist with Kelsey, he'd have been much more self-sufficient than he was. Their way of coping was to treat him like an infant, but that was already becoming inappropriate. It would be dreadful when Kelsey matured into a young man.

As they were finishing lunch, Moira reappeared with red eyes and a tear-swollen face. Kelsey made a soft sound and burrowed his head against her arm.

"You're my baby, aren't you?" Pressing her cheek against his bright hair, Moira brought him close to her. "You won't get so clever you won't love your nannie?"

Her russet eyes met Jill's, almost in challenge. "Because I'd rather keep you as you are than have you love someone more than me!"

"Lord help you, that's an awful thing to think, much less say!" Jill flinched, startled out of politeness.

"I don't care!" flashed Moira. "I've looked after my lad all these year. He's all I've got!" Her eyes glittered with tears and anger. "I know what'll happen! No offense to you, Miss Underwood, but when you don't get anywhere with him beyond making the poor baby dote on you, Paul will give you your walking papers. It'll be all the harder for Kelsey then. But I'll love him. I'll always see to him!" Her lips clamped shut. "And I'll fix whoever slashed my baby's toys. See if I don't!"

She was in no mood for reason. With great effort Jill concealed her pity and horror. "I believe Kelsey can learn to look after himself," she said slowly. "If you help him there's no fear of your losing contact. And you're young and beautiful. You don't have to stay buried at Dragon's Mount once Kelsey is more independent."

"I'll never leave Kelsey and Branwen!" Moira insisted.

"You won't have to. But you can enlarge your own life—"

"You sound like Mr. Regier! He'd like it fine if I'd go. Jealous, he is! As if Branwen could get along without me!" Moira banged down her glass. Once again she ran out. Kelsey whimpered. Jill decided she was going to have to come to an understanding with Moira if any real benefit was to come to Kelsey.

After lunch Jill took Kelsey to his room. The stuffed toys were on his bed, looking as if they'd never been attacked. Kelsey climbed up in the midst of his menagerie, tumbling them about him, making glad sounds.

There were many toys scattered about the room, but most were broken. The only things Jill reckoned helpful were a few balls, a big box of smooth-finished colored blocks, and the rocking horse which Kelsey apparently bestrode with vigor, to judge from its battered condition.

The sliding door to the adjoining room opened. Moira

stared defiantly at Jill, who smiled and nodded. Moira crossed to sit on the bed with Kelsey, who plopped a long-necked calico cat into her lap.

"Thank you, Kelsey," Moira said, shooting a look at Jill.

He bestowed a turquoise-eyed pig upon her next. Again she thanked him. Kelsey squealed, deciding it was a good game, and gave her all his toys except the favorite bear, so that Moira was up to her chin in every color and kind of cuddly beast.

"You think just talking to him will help?" she asked from a tangle of ears, tails, and sparkling eyes.

"Yes. Probably when he didn't talk at a normal age, everyone understandably gave up on him. But he can hear and imitate sound. If you talk with him as you would to a very young child, a few words at a time, and try to make a word mean something specific, I think he'll understand quite a bit and perhaps he'll learn to talk."

"That would be something, wouldn't it?"

"It would be a lot. Even a simple vocabulary is a wonderful tool."

Moira pondered. "I've got so I scarcely talk to Kelsey because I didn't think there was any hope he'd ever understand. He tugs me around—sort of shows me what he wants."

"Well, try giving what he wants a name. The main thing is not to be discouraged."

Hope fought with despair in Moira's handsome broad face. "It can't hurt him," she decided at last. "I'll do my best." She clenched her hands and said with violence, "That Paul! He'd like to forget he fathered Kelsey. He's always at poor Branwen to send the child away. But she won't. And I'll always help her see to him."

"Of course you will. But it'd be a lot happier for all of you if he improved till you could have an easy mind about him."

Moira drew a deep breath. "That would be like getting out of purgatory!"

"I believe it can happen." Jill rose. "I'm going to tea now, but I'll see Kelsey again before dinner."

"You're having tea with Mr. Regier again?"

"Yes." Jill's cheeks grew hot. Why should she blush guiltily? She felt obliged to explain. "He wants a full report on Kelsey each day."

"That may be what he tells you, dear," said Moira with a curling lip. "Do something for me, will you? Make him find out who ripped Kelsey's toys!"

"It may be better to leave it alone."

"Rubbish!" Moira hugged Kelsey. Her tawny eyes were those of a protective lioness. And she had claws too, Jill was sure. "Anyone'd do such a thing needs to be brought up short and sharp, made to sweat for it! Next time they might try cutting on the boy!"

"I'm sure Mr. Regier will see that nothing like that can happen," Jill said. "See you later, Moira. I'm so glad you're going to work with me for Kelsey's sake."

Jill told Kelsey good-bye and turned down the hall to her room. She must act normal with Paul at teatime. Perhaps he wouldn't want to see her, now that he and Branwen were surely lovers again.

Nonsense!

The purpose of the teatime appointment was to discuss Kelsey, nothing more or less. It was part of her work. She was lucky, very lucky, that Branwen had decided to win Paul back before anything wild and impossible could develop.

Common sense and duty, though, had little effect on the speeding beat of Jill's heart as she approached the door of Paul's study.

She gave a tap. There was no answer. She knocked louder. The door swung open. Mrs. Bascom stood there.

"Oh, good afternoon, miss! The master said I should give you a nice tea and make his apologies. He had to go out unexpectedly. If there's anything urgent about wee Kelsey, you're to leave a note on the desk."

Angry and astonished at the wave of disappointment that rose in her, Jill called after Mrs. Bascom who was bustling away.

"Please don't bother with tea! It—it's not a regular habit of mine."

Mrs. Bascom looked shocked. "Everyone needs afternoon tea, my dear!"

"I've managed without it twenty-four years," Jill replied a bit sharply, then softened her tone. "I'd love a few of those wholemeal biscuits if they're handy."

"No trouble at all, love." Relieved that Jill was having sustenance of a kind, Mrs. Bascom swished out in a whirl of pleats, green herringbone that day.

Jill avoided several hanging globes, crossed to the bookshelves. From the look of it Paul read French, German, and Greek.

What had been his urgent business? An afternoon tryst with Branwen? It was possible, of course, that Branwen had asked him to drop the teatime discussions.

Trying to put him out of her mind, Jill took down Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, a collection of poems, Frazer's *Golden Bough*. She added a few recent, widely touted novels as Mrs. Bascom came in with a bright tin of biscuits and a glass of milk.

"Here you are, miss," said the housekeeper. "Keep the tin in your room. It's nice to have a snack when a body needs one, and heaven knows, that's not always at a certain time of the clock, no matter what the master thinks!"

"Thank you," Jill said. She didn't want the milk, but there was no evading Mrs. Bascom's commanding eyes.

Draining the glass, Jill handed it back. "You needn't bother with dinner for me," she told the older woman. "I think I'll make a sandwich and have a kind of picnic."

"Alone?" Mrs. Bascom scanned her shrewdly. "Ah, now, love, that's no way for a pretty lass to do!"

"I enjoy having some time to myself," Jill insisted, truthfully enough. "And I haven't begun to explore Dragon's Mount."

"Maybe you'd do well not to start," Mrs. Bascom retorted. "Especially not after night falls! There be gypsies camping by the river now and then, and that's not all!"

Jill frowned. "What do you mean?"

Mrs. Bascom pursed her small rosebud mouth, surprisingly dainty in a woman otherwise so solid she was nearly masculine. "You won't laugh, Miss?"

"I'll try not to."

Mrs. Bascom's voice sank to a whisper. "There be ghosts in that oak forest!"

"Ghosts?" A prickling edged up Jill's spine; despite her promise, she gave an uneasy laugh. "You surely don't believe there are such things?"

"I know there are! Seen 'em as plain as I see you, the ghosts of those monks who planted the lilies. I don't suppose they'd harm you—they just yammer in Latin and wail something frightful. But the Weird Huntsman rides there on windy nights with his pack of red-eared, white hounds. Death hounds, they be! And any mortal they come upon doesn't live to tell of it!"

"You've just made me decide not to roam about in the oaks after dark," Jill said with a shivering chuckle. "Don't worry, Mrs. Bascom, I'll be careful."

"Best get Mr. Johnny to walk with you," advised the housekeeper. "And be careful of that bog between the glade and the road."

"I certainly will," Jill promised. "Thanks for the biscuits."

Once back in her room she lounged in the recliner, munched chocolate-frosted wholemeals, and refreshed her memories of Camelot.

Malory's medieval king, of course, would bear only a faint resemblance to the real Arthur, chieftain of Iron-Age Britain, who tried to fend off invading hordes from the continent.

She skimmed the ornate language, beguiled now and then into reading a passage. The siring of Arthur by the dragon king Uther, his pulling the sword from the stone to claim his kingdom, his Round Table with its marvelous host, Lancelot, Tristam, Galahad and all the others, bringing back their proud deeds as gifts to their king.

Then Arthur's last battle, his fatal wound, and departure for Avalon. Jill closed the book on Malory's words: *And inscribed on his tomb, men say, is the legend: HIC JACET ARTURUS, REX QUONDAM, REXQUE FUTURUS . . .*

King once, king to be.

Stirred, feeling unaccountably sad, Jill went to spend some extra time with Kelsey, whom she found in the sandbox. Moira nodded affably from her sun lounge. She had evidently decided Jill was no threat to her nanniedom. Vivian, walking the beam, colored as she saw Jill.

"It's good for—for poise!" she defended.

Jill nodded gravely. "I'm sure it is. Besides, it's fun."

"Fun is for children," Vivian announced loftily.

Hiding a smile, Jill sat down by Kelsey and started heaping sand into towers. At first he knocked them over, but after a while, tongue showing between his lips, he began to form mounds.

Jill played with him till mealtime. Then she made a thick ham sandwich, wrapped it in wax paper, and drifted downstairs and outside. She passed the summer pavilion, went through the gate into the orchard, and ate her supper in view of the great oaks.

It was still daylight, so she could smile at Mrs. Bascom's superstitious fancies, but Jill doubted that she would ever venture into the woods at night by herself.

Monks' ghosts or no, the glade of lilies had been breathtakingly lovely. Dusting crumbs from her hands, Jill glanced at the sun.

She could spend ten minutes admiring the secret flowers. Even with the books she had borrowed, it would be a long stretch till bedtime.

Soon she was in the cool, enchanted hush, trying to remember the turning off point to the gentle hollow.

Wasn't it about here? Yes, she remembered this big log! She moved quickly along, then stopped at the sound of voices.

These belonged to a man and a woman. Jill could not make out their words, but the tones were hostile. She reached a small prominence that let her look down. Her unwilling gaze fixed on a tall man at the edge of the lilies.

Johnny! He towered over Elin who, head thrown back, was hurling words at him. Jill turned. As soon as she was out of earshot, she ran from the woods.

ELEVEN

The trampoline arrived from London next day and was set up in an empty wine cellar once used to store outsize equipment that would deteriorate in outside weather.

Vivian got the knack of it very quickly. Before long, Kelsey, chortling, was bouncing on his knees.

As teatime approached, Jill wondered whether Paul would expect her. He would probably rather she didn't appear now that he had Branwen back. After the way he had failed to keep their appointment yesterday, it was really up to him to seek her out when next he deigned to inquire after his son.

Jill had joined Moira in tea and biscuits when a flustered Mrs. Bascom hurried into the upstairs sitting room.

"Oh, miss, there you are! The master's waiting for you."

Jill took another sip of tea. If only Moira's broad, pretty face didn't show so plainly what she thought would come of such meetings!

For a minute Jill considered sending an excuse, then gave herself a mental shake. She was Paul's employee. She must act like it.

"Please tell him I'll be down as soon as I pick up some articles he might like to read," she told the housekeeper. Mrs. Bascom went out in a flurry of plaid as Moira vented a jeering laugh.

"It's not articles he's interested in, love, nor Kelsey, either! Be sure of that!"

"Mr. Regier ordered a lot of equipment to help Kelsey," Jill point out. "So I think you have to give him credit for being very interested."

She stopped in her room to repair her lipstick and hair that had gotten windblown in the garden. Next she select-

ed a book on physical therapy and several journals with well-presented sections on the techniques she was using with Kelsey. She intended her conversation with Paul Regier to be wholly professional.

Thus armed, she went to the study and knocked. "Come in!" Paul shouted impatiently.

He met her almost at the threshold, steered her to the fireplace table, which held a tea tray with two cups.

"Mrs. Bascom tells me you were having tea upstairs," he said grumpily. "Wasn't it clear that I wanted to see you every afternoon?"

"When you weren't here yesterday, I thought you had changed your mind."

Jill poured tea and passed him his cup, took a bit more herself in order to have something to keep her hands occupied. She couldn't look straight at him.

He had Branwen back, didn't he? Beside her Jill knew she was a very plain Jane.

"I'll tell you when I change my mind," Paul said more gently. "Till then I'll expect you daily except weekends."

And if she came and he was gone elsewhere, her time was paid for. Jill shrugged.

"Very well, Mr. Regier," she said to the dragon in the blackened fireplace.

"I gather the trampoline came?" he said into thickening silence.

"Yes, and the walking beams are up and the tunnels in place."

"Kelsey uses these contrivances?" asked Paul dubiously.

"Indeed he does! He's awkward, of course, but he enjoys them." Once launched, Jill couldn't hide her enthusiasm and hopes but recounted all of Kelsey's small triumphs, explaining what these meant in terms of her past experience.

Now and then Paul asked a penetrating question. By the time she had finished her report, Jill was talking to him instead of the fireplace. She spread out the journals and book.

"These go into the value of coordination," she said. "I thought you might like to read them."

"I'll be fascinated."

He was looking not at the reading material but at her. Jill could not bear his eyes. They reached back of her words and resolutions to some unknown, frightening power that had slept in her till now.

"I—I'd better go," she said.

He didn't try to stop her.

During the next few days a sort of routine developed. Jill worked with Kelsey till teatime, reported to Paul, looked in on Kelsey again, and then roved off with a snack to eat someplace on the grounds.

She seldom saw Johnny, and when she did meet him in the hall or grounds, he was polite but vague. This was not surprising. What with delving into his mother's desertion and either resisting or succumbing to Elin, he had plenty on his mind.

Jill always was in her room by nine, when Vivian came to have her hair brushed while she talked about horrid prefects and the glories of the stage.

"Have you been to many plays?" she inquired once.

Jill shook her head. "I'm afraid I've never been to anything more professional than college productions."

"But you were in London!" Vivian accused, swinging around in shock.

"So I was, but I had other things to do."

Vivian gave her an astounded look. "If I lived in London, I should go to all the plays!"

"Well, when you grow up, possibly you can."

"When I grow up, I shall *be* in plays," Vivian said positively. "I won't need to go see them."

Plaiting the girl's dark, shining hair, Jill said, "It takes lots of work and perserverance to get on stage, but it must be a wonderful challenge—pretending to be someone else, I mean, getting the audience to understand how a character feels."

"I don't care about all that," said Vivian flatly. "I want the audience—everybody—to love me!"

"But you won't know them, dear!"

"That doesn't matter!"

A chill edged Jill's heart. She rested her hands on Vivian's shoulders.

"It's splendid to entertain crowds, Vivian, but when it comes to loving, you're better off with one person who truly cares about you! An audience is for when you're on stage. You need something for when you're not."

"No." Vivian's voice was decided. "I want a lot of love, but it's safer from people sitting out front! They can cheer and clap and make me feel wonderful, but they can't hurt me."

"An audience can be savage."

"Not so long as I'm a great actress—and I shall be great!"

"Oh, my dear! One person is enough for a lover's kind of loving!"

"My mother didn't think so," said Vivian with steely composure. She rose and give Jill a somber look. "Thanks for doing my hair."

"You're welcome," Jill said mechanically. She wanted to put her arms around the girl, but something in the child's face checked her.

Poor little frozen Vivian of the sorrows! Was she, after all, more handicapped than Kelsey? Had she ripped his toys? And if she hadn't, who had?

Johnny stopped Jill on the stairs Friday. "Remember our pilgrimage tomorrow," he said. "We'll leave at seven and stop off some place for breakfast. Mrs. Bascom is putting up a picnic lunch, so all you need to do is look pretty and wear comfortable walking shoes! Cobblestones are picturesque but hard on the feet."

"Fine," laughed Jill. They agreed to meet by the dining room entrance.

To Jill's satisfaction she was there a few minutes before he pulled up in the gray Rover he had rented.

"Top of the morning!" he called, piling out. His blue eyes traveled appreciatively from her sturdy sandals to her primrose yellow slacks and shirt. "If you haven't told Vivian you won't be in at nine tonight, go do it now! This is

St. John's Eve, and we have ancient, magical rites to perform!"

"I did tell her that I'd come to her room if I got back in time," Jill said.

Johnny helped her scramble into the front of the Rover, waved thanks and greetings to Mrs. Bascom, who leaned out the window to wish them a happy day.

"How's Elin?" Jill could not help asking. She remembered all too vividly how small and defiant Elin had looked confronting Johnny in the lily glade.

Johnny shrugged. "She has something on her mind. Probably thinking about dancing with the bulls tomorrow. It's almost a religious thing with her."

And does she want you to take her away? Jill wondered, studying the lean, hard line of his jaw. *Do you still love her? And if you do, what will be the end of it?*

Johnny turned to the subject of Kelsey and Vivian, talked about them till he parked at a thatched, timbered inn overgrown with rambling roses.

After sausage, eggs, porridge, toast, and several cups of coffee, they started out again.

"Look," cried Jill, pointing at a slope just coming into view. "A huge white horse!"

"There are a number of them in England," Johnny said. "They're carved out of the chalk hiding under the grass hereabouts and date back to prehistoric times." Johnny slowed so that she could marvel at the giant beast so sharply etched in the green hill's soft side. "I don't know about this fellow, but can you guess what the one at Uffington does once each hundred years?"

Jill shook her head solemnly.

"The Uffington white horse leaves his turf and trots down to where the old Wayland Smith wielded his hammer. People say that every century Wayland comes back long enough to shoe the horse." He gave a flourish of his hand. "From now on, we'll have no more talk of everyday things! We're following dragon trails to old shrines. Our conversation must be worthy!"

"Or a dragon will gobble us up?" teased Jill. "I thought

you were descended from a dragon-slayer! Has the knack died out?"

"Well, you see, we're out of practice!" Johnny replied solemnly. "So a maid who risked the wrath of dragons might not come out of it as well as she might have a thousand years ago!"

Jill had to laugh at him. "What are these dragon trails? You don't expect me to believe this paved road is one!"

"Believe it or not!" Johnny grinned, and there was no guessing how serious he was. "Dragon trails are simply currents of magnetic energy, the beat of the dragon's pulse. They undulate like currents of air or water and run between high points of particular power. Most of our churches are built on former sacred spots along the dragon's path."

"You sound more like a dragon worshiper than slayer!"

Johnny shrugged. "Dragons were bestowers of fertility. They symbolized the old pagan earth magic that Christian heroes like St. George had to kill. But I think that on Midsummer's Night dragons still fly over their ancient haunts and bless the crops and creatures."

The road certainly twisted enough to be a dragon's trail, through soft green hills and wooded meadows.

"There's Cadbury," Johnny said, nodding at a high, broad hill that looked flat on top. "It has the best claim for being Camelot. At any rate, some British chieftain had his stronghold there when Roman strength was crumbling about A.D. 450."

"If you can believe in dragons, you ought to believe in Arthur!"

"We will, for today at least," Johnny promised.

They stopped at Silbury Hill, a vast mound which Johnny said was the largest artificial one in Europe. It contained no burials and had no apparent use.

"But I say it marks the sacred dragon power road that led from Stonhenge and Avebury to Glastonbury," he added.

At Avebury they crossed the wide-flung circle of stones that ran through the village and into grazing land dotted

with sheep. Remains of two smaller circles were inside this huge one.

"Avebury was probably built around two thousand years before Christ," Johnny said. "Farmers cleared away a lot of the stones during the eighteenth century. Needed the land for farming and thought heathen relics ought to be destroyed anyway. They tilted the stones into a pit filled with burning straw and then broke the pillars to bits with sledge-hammers."

Jill gazed around at cottages nestling among the upright stones, the church at one end of the village, and the lush green pasture where she and Johnny stood.

"I wonder how many strange or beautiful things have been wrecked by people who thought them evil."

"More than we'll ever find traces of." Johnny scowled, pushed his unruly hair back from his forehead. "The tragedy is when people ruin a strange, beautiful person."

With a tug of jealousy she thought he was speaking of Elin. He caught her hand, shaking off whatever had clouded his spirits, and started for the van.

"I'm famished!" he said. "Shall we eat here?"

He had a blanket which served both as seat and tablecloth. Sitting on the gentle slope in the meadow, they demolished fried chicken, Stilton cheese, olives, apples, and gooseberry tart, and drained a thermos of milk.

Jill yawned and stretched. "Now I feel too lazy to move!"

"Onward!" Johnny got up and yanked her to her feet. "Stonehenge awaits!"

They traveled down the Vale of Pewsey, where Johnny showed Jill the great earthwork called the Wansdyke. By early afternoon they came in sight of a broken circle of stones on a barren hill.

"Is that it?" demanded Jill as Johnny swung into a big parking lot that looked wildly out of place in the rolling downland.

"That's it. What did you expect, the Colosseum?"

"No, I—I suppose one hears so much about Stonehenge that anything would be a letdown."

"Well, come have your look," said Johnny. "There's

not too big a crowd, thank goodness. My private, probably never-to-be-realized ambition is to be here some day all by myself! I think then one could sense how it used to be."

They bought tickets and passed through a tunnel under the road, ascended the slight rise to the giant stones, which grew more impressive the closer Jill got.

"The big uprights are the sarsen stones," Johnny explained. "They must have been dragged on sledges running on rollers from the Marlborough Downs twenty miles away. An educated guess is that it would take a thousand men several years just to get the hauling done." He drew her into the broken circle where there was a smaller ring of stones. "These bluestones came from South Wales, about two hundred and forty miles away."

"How did they get here?" Jill marvelled.

"Take your pick. Some say Merlin magicked them here. But the BBC tried some experiments back in 1954 and found that copies of prehistoric dugout canoes loaded with concrete weighing as much as a bluestone could be poled up the river by four schoolboys."

Jill made a face. "I prefer Merlin!"

"Who wouldn't? But if Merlin was contemporary with the historical Arthur—if there is an historical Arthur—then Stonehenge was here over two thousand years before him."

The wind was strong on the hill. Holding back her blowing hair, Jill studied the ancient pillars. Some of the sarsens still had lintels laid on top of them, rectangular stones that weighed tons.

"It's hard to believe men could do this without power machinery!"

"The architect or one of his advisors was almost certainly from Crete or Greece. He showed the builders how to square and dress the stones, how to join them accurately, and shape the lintels." Johnny traced a carving on the stone before them. "See this outline of a dagger? It's patterned almost exactly like those found in the Shaft Graves of southern Greece where Agamemnon ruled."

Johnny turned her to face the east. "Now in the morning of the summer solstice, which is the twenty-first of

June, the axis of Stonehenge faces the rising sun. But no one knows whether this place was devised as a temple or whether it was regarded as a powerful nuclear lab might be today."

"I wonder if people will ever try to figure out what our buildings are for," Jill pondered as they started down.

"Probably. They'll call our skyscrapers towers to heaven and think our observatories were centers of star worship."

"And they'll call airplanes dragons?" laughed Jill.

"Why not?" smiled Johnny.

Back in Glastonbury they walked among the ruins and stopped at Arthur's reputed tomb. "He's not really here," said Johnny. "He's buried somewhere along the dragon trail between here and Stonehenge."

"Then what is this?" asked Jill, touching the headstone.

Johnny chuckled. "It's the brilliant idea of some twelfth-century monk who would have made a mint on Madison Avenue! The Abbey had burned, and Richard the Lion Hearted was spending money on crusades, not rebuilding. So in order to attract donations and pilgrims, some prehistoric Celtic chief and his wife were dug up from the bogs and identified as Arthur and Guinevere. The publicity campaign worked. Money poured in, and the Abbey was restored."

"What a cynic!"

"Not at all. I believe in dragons."

Jill made a face at him. He went on more seriously, "Glastonbury has glory enough even if you discount Joseph of Arimathea and half the saints it claims. It was a great Celtic sanctuary, doubtless a school for Druids. Later it was the place where Celtic and Saxon Christianity met and united. Here monks copied books, reclaimed marshland for farming, started a glass factory, and made music. One can do much worse, my dear, than make a pilgrimage to Glastonbury!"

They left the greensward peace of the ruined Abbey and had dinner at an old coaching inn.

"Sol" said Johnny, saluting her with his wine. "You've

been to Camelot, you've gone back four thousand years at Stonehenge, and now you're in Avalon! How does it make you feel?"

"Dizzy!"

Johnny's blue eyes danced. "That's the wine."

Perhaps it was.

Jill didn't care. She felt comfortable and relaxed, content to let Johnny order for her and to enjoy roast duckling with orange sauce, topped off by delectably gooey chocolate profiteroles.

It was a slow, leisurely meal, just right after a long day's sight-seeing. Two cups of strong Turkish coffee took away Jill's drowsiness, so that she felt quite rested when they went out into the deepening twilight.

"Thank you," she told the tall young man beside her. "It's been a lovely day!"

Johnny helped her into the Rover. "It's not over yet," he said.

TWELVE

Instead of driving her to the big house, Johnny took a back road that led to the oak forest separating the Smithy from the rest of the estate.

"Here we are!" Before Jill could ask questions, Johnny climbed out. "I'll be back in a minute."

He was, with something he stowed behind his seat.

"What on earth—" began Jill.

"You'll soon know," he assured her. He glanced at his watch in the dashboard lights. "Ten to twelve. We'll be at the house by midnight, which is exactly right!"

"Right for what?" she demanded. "Johnny, do be sensible!"

"On Midsummer's Eve? Not on your life!"

There was nothing to be done with him. "I'll see you to your door," he said as he parked outside the rear entrance. Concealing whatever he had got in the oaks behind him, he followed Jill through the hall and up the stairs.

"Shut your eyes," he commanded as Jill paused by her door.

Jill frowned, but she was curious enough by now to do much riskier things. Reluctantly she obeyed.

Johnny took her in his arms and kissed her in the same breath, a light teasing brush of the lips. He let her go before she could object. Stepping back, he bowed and presented her with a sprig of mistletoe.

"Don't drop it!" he adjured her. "It mustn't touch the earth. I cut it with my knife instead of the golden sickle that Druids used, but it's magic for you anyway."

He laughed down at her, pleased with his surprise. "If

you sleep with it under your pillow tonight, you should dream of your future husband."

"Then I'll take care to leave it on my desk," she retorted. But it *had* been a perfect day, and she *was* grateful. Raising on tiptoe, she gave him a swift kiss. "Thank you, Johnny, for today. I will never forget our pilgrimage!"

"I hope not." He looked at her in a way that made her retreat. "You will come tomorrow to watch Elin dance with the bulls?"

"When will she do that?"

"Midmorning," smiled Johnny, "while pious folk are in church."

"I'll try to come," Jill promised.

He let his long fingers brush her hair before he turned, went down the stairs. Inside her room Jill locked the door as she switched on the light.

Happily exhausted, she put the mistletoe on her desk and got ready for bed.

Nice to know Johnny could kiss like that, as if he were smiling. Once his lips had been punishing, bruising . . . It was not until she was brushing out her hair that a reflection in the mirror made her spin about.

The lamp on her nightstand! The Amazon was headless!

Slowly going around to it, Jill saw no remnants of breakage. The shade was in place, the bulb intact. Somebody had taken the figure and broken off its head before replacing the bulb and shade.

Who? Why?

Thoroughly disturbed, Jill looked all around for the head, for good measure checked under the bed and in the giant wardrobe to make sure no one was hiding.

She was alone in the room. Who had been here, done this strange thing that seemed as demented as the assault on Kelsey's toys?

Somehow the neat headless Amazon was more frightening than if debris had been left. The tidiness of the vandalism indicated cool-nerved, deliberate malice.

Branwen had hidden here once, announced her intention of never letting Paul go, but anyone could have come in since the door wasn't locked. Jill turned off all the lights except the one in the bathroom and got into bed, found herself trembling.

Was she under threat at Dragon's Mount? Should she go away?

Her whole nature rebelled. Leave the field to her unknown enemy, give up her work with Kelsey, her growing closeness to Vivian? And the disturbing but heady relationships growing with Paul—and Johnny? Anyway, she might not be the only person in danger. Kelsey's stuffed animals had been savagely torn.

I won't go, Jill decided. She wouldn't be run off by the mad tricks of someone who probably hadn't the courage or will to attack a human being. Neither could she believe that Vivian would behead the Amazon.

Jill decided to tell Paul and get a key to her room, instead of leaving it unlocked except at night, when she shot the inside bolt.

With an effort of will she turned her thoughts to the day's journey. A panorama traveled through her mind. The gigantic white horse, Avebury, Silbury Hill, Stonehenge, Glastonbury.

Camelot, Avalon, St. John's Eve . . .

Next morning Jill had toast and coffee in the upstairs kitchen, stopped by her room to collect the decapitated Amazon, and was knocking on Paul's door at nine o'clock.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Jill Underwood."

She heard his footsteps, surprisingly light for a man of his size. The door swung open.

"Good morning!" he said, drawing her inside and closing the door behind them. Then he noticed the lamp. "Good heavens! So that atrocity finally met its end! You wouldn't have done it accidentally on purpose?"

"I didn't do it at all," Jill said.

Frown lines deepened between his eyes as she told him

the circumstances. "I suppose what worries me most is that whoever did it left everything so clean and orderly," she finished. "Anyway, I want a key to my room so I can lock it when I leave."

"We'll do better than that! Nebbit used to be a locksmith. I'll have him put in a new lock today, and only you and Mrs. Bascom shall have keys." Paul took the lamp from her, placed it on the refectory table. "I'll have the police check this for fingerprints aside from yours. Doubtless this is someone's idea of a prank, but I want it stopped."

"So do I!" said Jill with fervor that made Paul laugh.

He sobered at once, taking her hands. "I'm sure this is only a stupid trick, but I'd understand if you preferred to lodge in Glastonbury for a while. Shall I ring up a hotel and make arrangements?"

"That's extremely kind," Jill said, "but if I have a lock and key, I won't be troubled."

"Come sit for a moment and tell me about yesterday's foray into legend," Paul invited, drawing her toward the dragon-carved fireplace.

Briefly she gave her impressions. "I wish Johnny had let me go on thinking Arthur was really buried at Glastonbury!" she concluded.

Paul smiled. "Think what you choose," he suggested. "For the one view, there's Malory and the Red Book of Bath:

> At Glastonbury on the queer
> They made Artourez toumbe there,
> And wrote with Latyn verse thus:
> Hic jacet Arturus, rex quondam, rex futurus.

"And for the other side is the Welsh poet who wrote that there was a grave for Mark, a grave for Gareth, a grave for Gawain, but 'a mystery to the Day of Judgment, the grave of Arthur.' As I think you Americans say, pay your money and take your choice!"

"Where do you think he is?" Jill asked.

"Why, I believe three beautiful queens carried him off to the Island of the Blessed," said Paul with a straight face. "Why are you looking at the clock? This is Sunday."

"Elin is dancing with the cattle this morning. Have you ever watched her?"

Paul's face was expressionless. "Yes. It's quite something." He reached for a notebook, dismissing her, a hired servant.

"Thank you for your time and for troubling about my lock," she said stiffly, feeling slapped.

Back very straight, she moved to the door.

"Jill," he said. It was the first time he had used her given name, and it checked her.

With incredible swiftness he stepped in front of the door. He did not hold or constrain her, but kissed her with the skill of all his years, fired with an asking hunger that left Jill weak, shaken.

"Please!" she whispered, breaking away.

For a moment she saw pain naked in his eyes before he masked them, turned to open the door.

"You'd better hurry," he said with a half-bow. "If you'll stop by this evening, I'll have your new key."

Jill was well into the forest before her heart stopped thudding as if Mrs. Bascom's red-eared death hounds were after her.

Why had Paul kissed her? Especially now that he had Branwen?

And how could she, Jill, resolve to be ice to him and the next minute long to be in his arms? She pressed her hands to her burning cheeks.

This was impossible! He was married. She must tell him, with unmistakable firmness, that any further approach from him would send her away—and she must mean it.

If she meant it, she was sure he would accept it. Whatever else, Paul Regier hoped she could help his little son. He wouldn't jeopardize that. There were plenty of available women for an affair, but there were not many therapists trained for Kelsey's needs.

Partially calmed by this knowledge and her long walk, Jill came out of the forest. Beyond the Smithy, by the fence, a small crowd had gathered, all strangers to Jill except for Johnny and Wayland, who stepped back to give Jill a good vantage point.

"Did you dream last night?" Johnny inquired softly. She couldn't, so soon after Paul's kiss, meet Johnny's merry eyes.

"No," she said abruptly. "I told you I was leaving that mistletoe on my desk."

He shook his head. "Opportunity wasted," he mourned.

Jill ignored him to watch Elin feeding clover to her favorites. Only the two most handsome bulls were with her. The others grazed at a distance, white figures sharp among the green trees.

Elin smiled a greeting to Jill, seeming little more than a girl in her green stretch pants and shirt, rippling hair caught back with an antique metal clasp.

"Now, Wayland!" she called softly.

Wayland lifted the bar of the gate and went in. The bulls bowed their heads and snuffed, but Elin stroked and soothed them.

Then Wayland knelt. Elin balanced on his shoulders. As he rose, she vaulted from him, caught the horns of the nearest bull and somersaulted to his back.

From there she flipped to the other beast, movements so quick and airy that they were a dance, touched with magic. Under and over, behind and before the splendid white beasts dipped, sprang, and pirouetted the slim green figure.

At first Jill was so anxious that she held her breath, but as the bulls graciously allowed their human friend to make free with them, Jill's alarm quieted, and she was lost, entranced, in the beauty and grace and daring of the rite.

The dance was so lovely that it seemed both long and short at once; long in terms of endurance and skill, short because one feared it would end before it could be fully appreciated. Then Elin turned a backward somersault off the first bull and hurtled forward to Wayland's ready

hands. They touched, Wayland seemed to grip, but something happened, some blurred failure of balance or calculation.

Instead of the marvelous accommodation of unmoving body to flying one, Wayland seemed caught unprepared, staggered backward, though at the same time he reached blindly forward, trying to ease Elin's fall. They collided against one of the bulls, who panicked, plunged sideways, hooked savagely with those wicked crescent horns which found a target in the slim green form that almost fitted between the horns—almost, but not quite.

A scream of agony, a sighing wail, and shouts from the watchers, the frenzied bull trying to free itself of the burden blinding it. Its brute mind could not have understood that the being who had fed him, kissed him between his horns, was now the impaled weight he was tossing about; that the sweet, confident voice he had known was now the gurgling, moaning sound almost muffled by Wayland's curses as the smith tried to loose his wife.

The other bull, infected by animal and human terror, pawed nervously, bellowing low. Johnny caught up a pitchfork from the haystack near the wall, ran through the gate, followed by two men who snatched up a shovel and rake. They fended off the second bull while Wayland grappled the first creature by its massive neck, trying to restrain the tossing of its head.

Only seconds could have passed, yet to Jill, paralyzed, it seemed eternity. Then another man, panting from his run, came from the anvil with Wayland's great hammer, the hammer few could even lift.

Wayland took it, sighted, and sledged the base of the white bull's neck. The bull went down slowly, first the front legs, then his whole massive body, Elin still tangled across his head.

Johnny and Wayland worked her off the horns, gently as they could. The horns had penetrated completely through her. Blood gushed from her chest and stomach, red froth came from her mouth. Jill fought nausea, ran into the field to try to help, but Johnny, stuffing his torn

shirt over the wounds, shouted, "Ring the hospital! We need a doctor, an ambulance!"

As Jill sped away, she saw Wayland standing as if in a stupor, one arm hanging useless. Even as she hunted for the number, dialed it with shaking fingers, explained to a cool, impersonal voice what had happened, she couldn't believe it—that Elin, only a few minutes ago playing, dominating, dancing, must now be dying. Cut off like that; killed by her pets, by a fatal mistake in timing. How could Wayland endure it? Even if the fault in coordination had been Elin's, he would blame himself. He had been so strong, solid, dependable; the waiting security that let Elin skim through the air, prank on those deadly horns . . .

Too dreadful. Blind with tears, Jill hurried back to the group which now waited outside the field where the proud wild bull lay dead. If Elin knew that, she would weep, but she was unconscious now, her breath shallow, gasping, as she lay on Wayland's massive chest.

The girl died in the emergency room a few minutes after the ambulance got her there, though a perspiring old doctor, several nurses, and a young assistant did all they could.

"Poor bonny lass!" said the doctor, shaking his white head. "Lungs punctured. Severe internal hemorrhage. But if it's any comfort, Mr. Smith, when I asked her once when I was going to get to deliver her babies, she got that wild, laughing, fey look—said she didn't want to make old bones, she couldn't bear to think of the time she couldn't dance with her bulls. Now she won't grow old along with the rest of us."

"That she won't." Wayland roused briefly. He was blood-smeared, and his torn arm, roughly bandaged, showed a dark seepage. "She won't grow old along of me—or anyone."

Then he mercifully seemed to retreat into a dim, muted world while the doctor gave him tetanus and antibiotic shots, bandaged the ripped left arm while a blond young constable questioned him and Jill and Johnny. Wayland

responded to every query in a monotone, eyes glazed as those of the bull after that hammer blow.

"Appears to be sheer misadventure," said the officer, closing his report book. He studied Wayland, swallowed so that his large Adam's apple jerked. "I—I'm terribly sorry, sir." He nodded to Jill and went out.

Wayland refused a sedative. He sat in front with Johnny as they drove back to the Smithy. Words rumbled from him slowly, almost inaudible at times. "I never missed her before—never, since we began. That was ten years ago, when she was just a girl with no breasts at all. But even then I knew she'd be my woman one day . . . if I waited, if I was careful, if I was slow and sure and steady, always there when she needed to come to rest."

A muscle twitched in Johnny's cheek. Was he thinking that he had been one of Elin's flights, one she might never have returned from to her waiting, patient husband? But she'd never return from this flight, either. Not to anyone.

Tears bathed Jill's face. She wished there were some way to comfort Wayland, but even to touch him seemed an unforgivable intrusion into his remembering Elin.

"She was my light girl," the smith went on, moving his head from side to side in grief. "Made for dancing. She'll dance no more. I wanted to die with her; why couldn't I?"

Then he wept in a dreadful, silent, strong, man's way, shoulders heaving. He calmed as they neared the Smithy, clenching his big hands. "She was no dead weight," he said in a voice squeezed dry of feeling. "No dead weight, just an end to dancing—" He turned to Jill.

"I'd take it kind of you to clear out Elin's things. I can't. And I can't bear seeing them about. Branwen would do it, but she and Elin never got on. Elin would rather you saw to it."

"Of course I will," Jill promised, swallowing hard and trying to match his composure. "Is—is there anything you want?"

He shook his head violently, as a wounded bison might have. "There's nothing of her in things I can hold. Please, get all of it away."

He got out of the car and started toward his anvil.

"Wayland!" Johnny called. "Here, man, you can't work, your arm's wounded."

"My right arm is sound," answered Wayland without turning. "I can't come in yet. But you'll bide, won't you, Johnny lad? Bide with me this night?"

"I'll stay," Johnny said.

With a helpless shrug he followed Jill into the house.

Even though Wayland had almost begged her to dispose of Elin's things, Jill felt like a thief or trespasser as she went through the dresser, chest, and wardrobe, heaping Elin's belongings into bags and boxes Johnny found.

His face was a gaunt mask. He had told Elin there could be nothing between them, but had he meant it, had he still loved her? In a way, he surely must; his pain must have been infinitely greater than Jill's, yet he said nothing, and she feared to venture into his silence.

As she filled containers, Johnny took them down from the loft. "I'll take the things to Oxfam," Johnny said. "They'll all go in the boot of my car, be out of the way till I can give them to the center."

But there was no way to remove the empty half of the bed, the furniture she'd shared, the kitchen where she'd cooked. The place would be full of images for Wayland, constant reminders.

Clearing the bathroom of its intimate clutter, terry scuffs and robe, hair brush, pink toothbrush that couldn't be Wayland's, Jill found herself crying and unable to stop, though Johnny's eyes met hers in the bathroom mirror as he stood in the door.

"Try to remember one thing," he told her, accepting the last pitiful collection. "Elin had a real horror of growing old, of getting heavy, being tied to earth. Now she never will."

Wayland's hammer rang from outside. Jill put her hands to her forehead. "I hope Wayland will be able to remember her dancing," she said. "Not the way she was at the end. How frightful for him, that he couldn't catch her."

"At least," said Johnny with a strange look, "he had

his desire, his dream, for seven years." He hefted his burden and left abruptly.

Did Johnny mean that Elin had been his dream too? Jill desperately tried to force everything out of her mind except the mechanics of getting dinner. She found stew meat, browned it, and added chopped vegetables, letting it simmer while she mixed a cake.

When she started to set the table, Johnny took the plates from her. "You'd better get home before night falls. I can't leave Wayland to see you through the oaks."

The hammer kept up its distant sledging sound. The hammer that had killed the bull. Jill hoped one of the neighbors had cleaned it of any hairs or blood.

"Johnny, you—you'll make him stop soon?"

"He'll have to quit when it's dark."

"You will call me if there's anything I can do?"

"Yes." Johnny held her wrist a moment, frowning. "You'd better let Dad break it to Branwen. She didn't like Elin, and there's no telling how she'll react."

Or what she might say to me? About you and Elin? "Yes," nodded Jill. "That does seem best." If Branwen made any slighting remark about the dead girl, Jill was afraid of completely losing control. By all means, let Paul, the composed and cool, be the messenger.

"I'll stay with Wayland till the funeral's over and he's settled a bit," Johnny went on.

He put his arm around Jill. In spite of her troubled thoughts about him and Elin, Jill could not resist leaning her head on his shoulder. She hadn't known it, had driven herself to combat the shocking horror of Elin's death, but she was very tired. Johnny's tough, lean body was reassuring, deeply comforting.

"Are you all right?" he asked gently.

Who could be, just now? How odd that he should sustain her instead of it being reversed! Jill made herself stand erect, gave Johnny's chin a brush of her lips.

"I'll be fine."

She slipped out the back door. For a long way into the forest she could hear Wayland's hammer.

Jill was glad to reach her room unseen, but when she tried the door, it was locked. She remembered with dismay that Paul had promised to have a new lock put in. To get the key, she had to see him. Jill simply felt unable to see him just now. The shock of Elin's death had tugged at the anchoring roots of normality. Jill really feared breaking down in front of him, weeping or raging over whatever had cut Elin's life so short.

After a moment's hesitation Jill went down the corridor toward the garden stairs. She would play with Kelsey a while.

Kelsey was just emerging from one of the play tunnels and who should come right after but Vivian, growling like a bear to Kelsey's gurgling, great delight.

Jill stopped, scarcely believing her eyes. Aloof Vivian, galumphing on all fours? The children were so absorbed that they didn't notice Jill. Before they could, she stepped back inside.

What Kelsey was getting from his half-sister was invaluable—acceptance as a person, roistering, back-and-forth fun.

Just as vital, Vivian was with him instead of frozen into her private sphere. With the part of her that could comprehend events separated from Elin's death, Jill was pleased, but that morning's tragedy damped the exhilaration she would have felt at any other time.

Upstairs she made coffee and pondered alternatives to asking Paul for her key. She could watch television in the sitting room next door or wander about the grounds.

The danger lay in meeting someone. She simply did not feel able to talk to anyone till Elin's death was general knowledge, till it ceased to be a terrible secret.

Such brutal facts should be their own messengers. In the minds of most people Elin still lived. Her death would not seem quite real till everyone knew about it and used that knowledge to shroud their private image of that light, dancing girl with sun-streaked, wheaten hair.

Stowing her cup in the dishwasher, Jill decided to ask for her key. She couldn't avoid Paul long.

If Johnny hadn't phoned the news by now, she would just have to give it to Paul as baldly and flatly as possible in order not to cry.

Turning the corner of the hall, Jill collided with the man of whom she was thinking.

He caught her, steadied her, while flickering, liquid fire ran between them.

But when she set her hands against Paul, pushed slightly, he released her at once. "Do you know?" she asked, voice breaking in spite of her resolves. "Do you know about Elin?"

The light in the hall was so dim that she could not see his expression, but his shoulders set rigidly. He reached in his pocket and handed her a key.

"This is to your room. May I come in a moment?"

"I—I don't feel able to talk."

"No wonder, you poor girl!" He took her arm, walked her along the hall. "Never mind, I won't stay long."

Jill shook her head. "I can't even think!"

"You don't have to. Nor need you be nervous because I forgot myself. You were in my arms before I knew it." In the light from a window she saw that his face was set in self-mockery. "How we lie, Jill!" he said with violence. "I kissed you because I doubted if I'd have another chance! At my age one doesn't miss chances. But I won't do it again."

Jill's trembling fingers made heavy weather of the new lock. "May I?" he asked, took the key from her, and turned it for her, pushed open the door.

Jill went to stand by the window, heart pounding in a slow, labored way. A new lamp of polished bronze was on the bedside table.

"The private investigator was here today. The lamp had been wiped clean of prints or handled with gloves to start with." Paul spread his hands. "I'm afraid all I can do is offer again to lodge you in town, unless you're quite happy about trusting the new lock."

Compared to Elin's death, the headless Amazon seemed a spiteful child's prank. "I'll keep my door locked," said Jill impatiently. "Johnny *has* called you?"

"Yes." He shrugged wearily, sinking into the recliner. "What can I say?"

Jill turned away. "You—you might at least say you're sorry!"

Paul leaned forward, voice jaggedly savage. "Sorry! My God, you say I should be sorry! That's a pale word for what I feel! A beautiful young woman is dead, her husband must mourn with some sense of guilt. A rare, magnificent bull is dead, one of the herd my family has labored to preserve."

Rising, Paul came to stand over Jill. "You are young, Jill! Free of that terrible, inevitable curse that touches most who live long enough—the curse of guilt. It weighs on the heart, crushing, bruising, stripping of innocence, the conceit that one is a decent being. If one survives it, and most do, one gives up all attempts at being humane, or keeps trying, but without illusions."

Paul stared at the night outside, so worn and haggard that Jill felt impelled to comfort him, kept where she was only by thinking of Elin and cold fear. Could he be speaking of his first wife? Had he sent her off, but let it seem she was the faithless one?

"I try," Paul said bleakly. "But without illusions. I know what I am." His gaze lifted to Jill. "Would you believe me when I say that I think Elin was not sorry to die? I truly feel that she knew she would sooner or later be unfaithful to Wayland or leave him. Her nature could accept death but not the guilt she glimpsed before her."

Did he guess that Elin had loved Johnny? Had Johnny, in distress, said something of what Jill had overheard?

Jill was too exhausted to probe, too torn by conflict. Suddenly her face was in her hands. She gave way to the wild sobbing that had been dammed up inside her.

"That's good," said Paul wearily. "It's right to weep for Elin. I wish I could!"

What he didn't know as he went out, closing the door, was that Jill wept for him too. For Wayland, Johnny—for all of them at Dragon's Mount.

Vivian appeared at nine, brush in hand. Her forlorn

look was in sharp contrast to her afternoon's clowning. She didn't give the brush to Jill, but stood in the middle of the room, eyes squeezed half-shut.

"Miss Underwood, you'll hate me, and it's horrid, and I don't know why I did it, but I have to tell you!" she burst out, not pausing for breath. "I tore Kelsey's toys open! I did it that morning before I went to school, I was so miserable and—and all tight and screaming in my mind, and I just couldn't stand it, I had to do something awful and wicked!"

Jill blinked. "You, Vivian?"

Mutely the girl nodded, lips pressed together, eyes completely shut now, as if she couldn't bear to face anyone. A tear rolled down her nose, splashed on her robe. She might have been before a firing squad.

"There's no use telling Kelsey you're sorry," Jill said at last. "He wouldn't understand. But he understands your playing with him and being nice."

Vivian opened one eye. "You don't hate me?" she asked with droll caution.

"How could I?" demanded Jill, catching the girl to her and holding her close. "But there's someone else you should tell."

Alarm widened Vivian's eyes. "Who?"

"Your father."

"No! Not him! He—he'd send me off to boarding school! I know he would!"

Jill held the girl's hand tight. "Your father protected you, Vivian. He must have thought you did it. So did Branwen and Moira. They wanted a real search for the culprit and punishment. But your father made them drop that idea."

"Really?" Vivian stared in disbelief. "Are—are you sure?"

"Quite sure!"

"Then I will tell him," Vivian said. "Tomorrow after school."

"Good. Now give me that hair brush. If you fall asleep in class tomorrow, what will the prefect say?"

Vivian almost purred as Jill brushed out the tangles and

braided the shining hair. "Next time you get that tight, choked-up feeling, come tell me about it," Jill said.

"May I really?"

Vivian craned her neck around, eyes shining. When Jill nodded, the child enveloped her in a gusty hug that left them both laughing. But after Vivian had padded down the hall, Jill frowned at the new lamp.

Vivian's confession didn't explain *that*.

From now on, she would lock the door even if she were only going to the kitchen for a sandwich, and the new lock should keep out joke players.

And if they weren't joking?

A chill shot down Jill's spine, but it had been too catastrophic a day for her to worry much about anything unconnected with Elin.

Running a hot tub, Jill soaked till the tension drained out of her. It was early, but she fell into numbed sleep almost as soon as she went to bed.

THIRTEEN

The next weeks were strange ones, experienced by Jill on two levels. On one level she worked with Kelsey, chatted with Moira, and brushed Vivian's hair in nightly sessions when the girl confided all manner of ten-year-old hopes and puzzlements. There was normalcy and gratifying progress with Kelsey, whose coordination had vastly improved and who could now say several words, but beyond Kelsey's improvement Jill was haunted by the memory of Elin, the mystery of the first Mrs. Regier's disappearance, and knowledge that someone, presumably still in the household, had tried to frighten her by breaking off the Amazon's head. And there were her tormenting, clashing emotions about Paul.

She couldn't love him—he was Branwen's!

Jill kept aloof from him as much as possible and made her teatime reports as brief and factual as she could.

"You rattle it off like a bookkeeper," he told her one evening, holding out his cup for more tea. "But you can't quite conceal how pleased you are! The boy is starting to dress himself, plays with much more directed purpose, and has rudimentary conversation. That's a lot to accomplish in a bit over three weeks!"

"He's doing remarkably well," Jill admitted, warming at Paul's interest in Kelsey and the tacit praise. "Of course, the value of Vivian playing and talking with him simply defies estimation!"

Paul waved this aside. "Vivian would never have willingly spent a moment with Kelsey before you came. Nor would she have come to admit that she had torn his toys and swear that from now she would be his protector."

"Then I'm very glad I came," said Jill.

"Are you?"

His dark eyes probed her. Jill thought of Branwen and turned away. Paul leaned forward.

"Please," his voice was as urgent as a touch, though he kept his hands from her. "Please stay for dinner."

"Thank you, but I'd better not."

"Why?"

"I—I just can't!"

"Look at me."

As if he had taken command of her will, she slowly faced him. He took her hands, and then her inner terror was complete.

"Why do you run from me, Jill?" His deep voice was husky with pain. "Is it because I'm married? Or are you just afraid?"

"Afraid?" she echoed in a failing attempt at derision. "What of?"

"Of your feelings. Of acting like a woman!"

"You mean I'm not a woman if I don't come to heel at your whistle?"

He caught in his breath with a choking sound. She felt as if she had stabbed him.

"If that's what you think . . ." He let her hands go. The icy mask slipped over his features along with a hard smile. "I suppose your mind buzzes with cautionary reminders of my wicked ways. Johnny and my wife have doubtless given me a fascinating character!"

He shrugged. "Go in safety, Jill. Why should you risk yourself for the dubious pleasure of my company?"

He saw her to the door and bowed as usual in that courtly way that was only one of the manifestations of his singularity, his difference from all the other men she had known.

The people of Dragon's Mount called him master from more than ingrained habit. He deserved the title.

Jill locked the door to her room, leaned against it in momentary weakness, as she imagined Paul in his study, staring at his cold fireplace with its writhing dragons.

What phantasms plagued him? Had he in some way wronged Johnny's mother, driven her to elope? His rec-

onciliation with Branwen seemed not to have brought him either peace or happiness.

Jill dared not help him in the only way she could, by staying with him, talking away accusing shadows.

She went to stand at the window, gaze out across the gardens and orchards to the oak forest. Paul could never be happy with one wôman—any new one would be only a temporary alleviation.

Compared to Paul, even Johnny, the most forceful young man she had ever met, seemed boyish, all rough edges. This tortured empathy and attraction she felt for Paul might not be love, but it was compelling enough to tempt her to run downstairs to him.

Stiffening her resolve, she left her room, locked the door, and went down to Kelsey in the garden.

What kind of fool was she?

Vivian's mother hadn't stayed around to be treated like devalued human surplus, but what of Branwen? Paul had obviously hungered for her till he had her again; now she apparently lost the power to hold him.

No woman intrigued Paul for long. It was easy to guess why. He wanted a perfect woman. So he would always scorn what he had.

Jill knew her failings well enough to know that becoming his love would not ease him more than temporarily, and it would destroy her.

Johnny had stayed with Wayland till after Elin's cremation. Though he was now back in his turret room, Jill seldom saw him. When they did meet, he seemed preoccupied. She wanted to tell him about the headless Amazon, ask his opinion, but the right chance never came.

One day Wayland came to visit his sister and stopped by the garden to play a moment with his small, golden-haired nephew.

There was more white in his hair, and his massive shoulders were bowed, but calm lay beneath the ravaged lines of his face. "Thank you, miss, for your help that day," he said while Branwen frowned.

"It was nothing," Jill protested. "I— You know how sorry I am. Is there anything I can do?"

"Why, I'd be glad for you to visit again!" A smile wrinkled the edges of his shrewd, black eyes. "Johnny comes by now and then. Have him bring you to drink some mead with me."

"I'll be glad to," Jill promised and put her hand in Wayland's brawny ones, scarred from the bulls' horns.

He gave Kelsey a pat on the head and limped away.

Branwen lingered.

"Poor Elin! A pity for anyone to die so young, isn't it?" Her amber eyes thrust into Jill. "But one never knows what may happen in a twinkling. Don't you find it so, Miss Underwood?"

"I've had some surprises here," Jill returned. She stared at Branwen Regier, wondering if she had decapitated the Amazon. "I suppose you haven't been back in my room since that first night?"

"It's locked," Branwen said and smiled scornfully, not even pretending that she hadn't tested it.

"Someone ruined the lamp before Mr. Regier had a new lock installed."

"Are you sure you didn't?"

Jill gasped as if the other woman had hit her in the stomach. "Why would I do it?" she demanded when she could speak.

"So you could run to my husband and make him feel protective!" Branwen jabbed. "He fell for it, didn't he?"

Jill clenched her hands, forced herself to speak slowly, softly, and not alarm Kelsey. "I didn't mutilate that lamp, Mrs. Regier. If you think I did, and worse, did it to involve your husband, I'm sorry for you."

"Why?" blazed Dragon's Mount's mistress.

"It must be terrible to have so suspicious a mind."

Tawny eyes narrowing, Branwen stepped forward as if to grasp or assault Jill, who watched her steadily though her heart pounded.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll leave this house!"

"Mrs. Regier! You must realize how much Kelsey is improving!"

"I want you to go!"

"Then you had better tell Mr. Regier so," shot back Jill, whose blood was rising. What kind of woman was this who didn't want to help her child?

Branwen's face was now so contorted that it had lost its beauty, seemed the mask of a fury or witch.

"I will tell him!" she cried. "But whatever he says, you'd better remember that what happens to a figurine can happen to a woman!"

She whirled toward the house. Jill played with Kelsey but was so angry and distressed that he seemed to sense it. Jill was glad when Moira came to look after him.

She was not so glad that it was teatime. What had Branwen told her husband? What would he say?

Jill made her report, scarcely looking at Paul. "That's all," she concluded after a pause.

"Not quite," he said. "I never took you for a girl to go about poking hornets' nests or one to enjoy rows."

"I don't."

"Didn't you?"

"I didn't say half what I could have," Jill retorted. "I don't enjoy being accused of defacing other people's property. If you think I did, I wish to resign immediately!"

She had believed herself calm, but her voice rose slightly. To her disgust her hands were trembling. She would disgrace herself if she didn't get out at once. Springing to her feet, she was halfway to the door when Paul's hands closed on her shoulders.

"Jill, you little fool! Can't you guess that I sent Branwen off with a flea in her ear?"

"How should I know?" Jill struggled in his grasp, but he held her easily, without apparent effort. "She's your wife. I'm a stranger, an employee!"

His answer was a kiss that drove everything from her mind, engulfing, arousing demand that waked feelings Jill had never felt before.

"Now," he said in an almost inaudible voice as he drew

back, "tell me again we're strangers!" She was glad to see that he was shaken too, for she had to fight back tears.

"Oh, Paul, why did you do that?"

He stared at her, threw back his head, and laughed. "What a question!"

Jill drew herself erect in spite of a ridiculous weakness in her legs. "Don't quarrel with your wife over me," she said with bitter dignity. "I won't be your mistress.'

He dismissed that with a gesture. "My dear, I don't want a mistress." With one long stride he was in front of her. Smiling, he put a hand on either side of her face. "I want a wife," he said. "You, Jill."

"You have a wife!"

His mouth jerked down. "I have a shrew. She'd divorce me if there were enough in it for her."

Jill shook her head to clear it. He was still there, watching her with eyes that seemed to reach to the back of her mind and heart, see everything, know she was powerfully stirred by him.

"I can't marry you," she said.

If he was chagrined, he didn't show it. "Of course that's how you feel. I have no right to even speak of it—now." His eyes implored her. "Sit down. Please. Let's talk a little, gently."

She took a chair, spoke in as steady and reasonable a tone as she could manage. "Time won't alter facts, Paul."

"What facts?" he probed.

"This is Branwen's home and Kelsey's."

Paul frowned. "I yearned after Branwen far too long, but it's finished. She only took me back after you came in order to coerce me, keep her hold. It's broken! She doesn't love me. I tell you, if I give her enough, she'll let me go."

"I can't listen!"

Jill got up. Paul caught her hand. "Listen to me, love! I have lived spring and summer. My fall is passing! With you I can forget that winter's coming on. With you life is warm and bright, full of hope again. You are the last dream I shall ever have."

When she would have spoken, he laid his fingers on her lips. "How can you understand, my darling? You are so young—so lovely and so young! If the evil days must ever come to you, I trust it won't be for long, long years. Don't say anything now. And don't worry, I won't try to court you till I can do so decently."

That time he let her go.

FOURTEEN

Next day was Friday. Soft rain was falling, so Jill took Kelsey to the cellar playroom. Vivian joined them after her lessons, and the two children were soon absorbed in painting on long sheets of paper, both using their fingers.

While overseeing Kelsey on the trampoline and pursuing him through the crawling tunnels, Jill had been able to avoid thinking much about Paul's startling wish that they marry. Once Kelsey was occupied with Vivian, though, Jill could not keep from retracing the previous evening.

Two facts emerged from her reverie. First, she might not be in love with Paul, but he dominated her thoughts. Other men seemed ordinary beside him. If it were simply a matter of choice—provided Paul let her keep working with children like Kelsey—she would marry him. Whatever followed, Paul would teach her love and life in a way no one else could!

But, secondly, the barrier between them was too great. Even if Branwen agreed to a divorce, Jill would feel like a homebreaker.

It was impossible, always would be. If Paul refused to accept that, Jill would have to leave.

And she didn't want to!

She loved Kelsey. His improvement thrilled her. She was learning a great deal from him that she could incorporate into future work in her chosen field.

Vivian was like a younger sister. If Jill left, that proud, young heart would feel it as a new desertion, freeze again.

Jill had not seen Branwen since their quarrel. Jill hoped that by the time her path crossed the other woman's, Branwen would have realized that surface courtesy was necessary.

About midmorning Moira came down, bringing coffee.

Such thoughtfulness was not usual with her, so Jill accepted her cup with pleased surprise.

"How nice of you, Moira! I was just wishing for a drink."

"Thought you might be glad of something hot." Moira perched somewhat awkwardly on a stool, patting her luxuriant copper hair into place about her broad, boldly attractive face. "Rain puts chill in this old house, that's for sure!"

Jill agreed, sipped the fragrant brew rich with cream from Dragon's Mount's dairy. Moira watched the children, wrinkling her nose a bit.

"A rare mess, that is! Don't you get tired of cleaning up after the little tykes?"

"It's my job," said Jill, puzzled.

Moira leaned forward. "Listen, love," she said confidentially. "Get yourself another job! Better yet, go back to your country!"

"Why do you say that?" Jill stared at the plump, pretty woman, completely baffled. Moira, after all, benefitted from Jill's work, both in seeing Kelsey grow more self-sufficient and in being less encumbered with him. "Aren't you satisfied with Kelsey's progress?"

Moira nodded vigorously. "Indeed I am, love! And I'm under obligation for your pains with the lad. I'd be sorry to see you go, but it's because I appreciate all you've done that I'm warning you. Dragon's Mount isn't safe!"

Jill's scalp prickled. She had a flashing memory of Branwen's anger, the headless Amazon. "What do you mean?"

"I can't tell you, miss." Moira, after all, had to be loyal to her mistress. "But I do know what I'm talking about. If you stay here, something terrible will happen!"

"Such as what?" challenged Jill.

Moira looked more nervous. "I don't know!"

"You really can't expect me to leave a good job and children I care for deeply on some hint as vague as that!"

"When it happens, miss, there won't be anything vague about it!"

Jill's scalp prickled, though she held herself under tight

control. This could well be a trick of Branwen's, to send Moira to coax Jill, under a cloak of friendship and concern, into leaving.

"Thank you for caring what becomes of me," Jill said. "But please don't worry."

"Then you won't go?" asked Moira slowly.

Jill spoke firmly in spite of a queasy sensation in the pit of her stomach. "I need another year with Kelsey, maybe more."

"Oh." Moira rose with a kind of sigh. "Well, I tried. You'll remember that, won't you, if anything happens?"

"Of course I will, but nothing's going to happen!"

Moira gave Jill a lingering stare, seemed about to renew her urging, then sighed, and went out.

Jill meant to ignore Moira's rather lugubrious plea, but it nagged the fringe of her consciousness, making her tense, irritable.

Dull, lowering skies did nothing to improve her mood that afternoon. It took all her self-control not to snap at the children.

Still in an irritable state, she went down for tea, poured it, made her account to Paul while standing by the mantel.

"What ails you today?" Paul asked, lifting an eyebrow. "I've never seen you so restless!"

"It's the weather, I suppose." Jill scowled at the misty, brooding overcast. "I don't mind storms, but this sort of glum, drippy rain depresses me!"

"Good heavens!" laughed Paul. "You don't realize what a stretch of fine, fair weather we've had since you've been here!"

"I know it has to rain," Jill said and smiled at her own cantankerousness. "I just wish it would do it nights!"

"Strange," teased Paul, eyes twinkling. "I never expected a young woman of your Spartan ethics to be influenced by a fleeting phenomenon like English weather!"

"And I never expected to be accused of Spartan ethics!" Jill riposted.

Paul shook his head. "My dear, my love," he said indulgently, yet with a note of pain. "You seem determined to

make your life a tedious example of the categorical imperative: Act only in a way you judge worthy of universal emulation!"

Dangerous ground.

"Please!" Jill protested, grimacing. "I have enough trouble acting as I think I should!"

Paul made an arch of his fingers, cradled his chin on it as he contemplated her. "Would it fit with your proper actions to have dinner with me tonight?"

Sorely tempted, she compelled herself to say carelessly, "Sorry, I've other plans."

"With Johnny?"

"Does it matter?" Jill shrugged. Better, much better, to hurt or anger Paul now than to sink deeper into a situation that promised trouble and grief to everyone.

Paul's face was stony. "What you do in your own time is your affair," he conceded. Rising, he saw her to the door. "Good night, then. I think I'll drive up to London tonight, spend a few days. Is there anything I should bring back for Kelsey?"

"Thank you, I think he has all he needs for now. Have a nice trip."

"Nice it won't be," he said grimly. "Necessary, perhaps."

The study door closed.

Jill knew he was going in order to escape, at least briefly, from his frustrations at Dragon's Mount. His escape would almost certainly include a woman. Jill knew she must not be his mistress, but when she imagined him with somebody else, a fierce burning curved through her, leaving a kind of despairing ache.

Oh Paul! she thought, running up the stairs. *There's no time for us, no where, no place—not in this world!*

If only she did have a date, she thought forlornly as she locked herself into her room, stared at the gloom outside. Night would fall early because of the heavy clouds. It would be no evening for rambling.

Defiantly making a face at the leering gargoyles carved on the huge wardrobe, Jill decided to have a slow luxuri-

ant bath, manicure her nails, wash and roll her hair—do properly all the grooming chores she usually rushed through piecemeal.

But first she'd make an immense poor boy sandwich—a crusty loaf, split and buttered, then filled with ham, cheese, lettuce, and anything else that looked savory. Jill's mouth watered at the thought, and she smiled wryly, feeling better.

At least, my girl, you'll never pine away—starve in the name of love, she mocked herself. And at nine Vivian would come in for her brushing and chat. The night would pass, the sun would shine again. If the days without seeing Paul stretched like a desert, it was a desert she must cross sooner or later; better do it in stages.

Thus self-admonished, Jill unlocked her door, opened it, and almost collided with Moira, who was in the act of knocking.

"Gracious, you gave me a turn!" gasped Moira. "Please come along, will you? If you're determined to stay here, there's something you ought to see!"

"What?" Jill demanded bluntly.

"It could save your life."

"Fine. But why the mystery?"

Moira's nostril flared with exasperation. "I have to *show* you. It's an escape route from the house. In case of fire or an emergency, you'd best know of it!"

Jill frowned. "I should think everyone ought to be aware of such an exit. Does Mrs. Bascom know?"

"I doubt it," Moira said impatiently. "The Regiers always keep it a secret in the family so no thieves or criminals can sneak in from the outside way."

Things clicked in Jill's mind. Mrs. Bascom's manner over the first Mrs. Regier's desertion, Johnny's search for the truth about it. "Does Johnny know about the secret way?" Jill probed.

"I suppose so," Moira said indifferently. "Now are you coming or aren't you? I wanted to do you a good turn, but if you're no more interested than that, forget it!"

Jill was interested. Not only might such an exit be a life-

saver in certain circumstances, but exploring it tonight would add exciting spice to what threatened to be a very dull weekend. Anyway, it was better to have Moira's good will than put her off.

"Let's go then," laughed Jill. "I guess I won't starve in the next hour."

"No," agreed Moira. "It takes rather longer than that."

Locking her door, Jill followed Moira along the corridor. Branwen was in Kelsey's room, singing to him, and as they passed the lounge, Jill glimpsed Vivian watching television.

A peaceful evening, sheltered from the chill drizzle outside. Jill thought of Paul on his way to London; not a good night for driving. He must have made the journey many times before, though, in all kinds of weather. To have lived to his present age, he had to be one of the survivors. Survivors might not be happy, but whatever they had come through—desertion, war, prison, illness, loss of faith or love—they had one thing in common: they had lived where others died.

Moira turned the corner at the hall angle, led the way past several closed doors to a slim, graceful, high door at the end of the corridor. The subtle rosewood was carved with a unicorn standing in a copse, the crescent moon with Venus touching its tip showing above the trees, while a maiden watched from the foliage. From the smile on her lips, one sensed that she would capture the aloof, beautiful beast but one hoped that he would somehow escape.

Jill halted as Moira brought out a key and unlocked the door. "Is this the turret room? Where Johnny's staying?"

"You haven't been here?" Moira shot Jill an amused, questioning glance. "Yes, it's the turret room. Belonged to the first Mrs. Regier."

"Then we shouldn't go in," Jill said and started to turn.

"But, miss, love!" cried Moira. "What I must show you is here! Johnny won't mind. Didn't the randy lad give me this key?"

Jill recoiled. It was no real wonder, of course, if Johnny and Moira chose to entertain each other. But . . .

"Shocked?" Moira teased. "Thought because the young master moons a bit after you that he'd no eye for anyone else?"

"It's none of my business," Jill said stiffly. "Look, Moira, thanks very much for your concern, but let's forget the exit."

"Johnny's gone up to London. He won't care. And it's not truly his room anyway, miss. Don't be foolish! Supposing you were alone upstairs and had to get Kelsey or Vivian out? You've no right not to know how!"

There was much in that. Jill didn't know if it was the thought of trespassing that was so repugnant. Or perhaps she just wanted to get away from Moira till she could digest the idea of Johnny taking her along the dragon trails and kissing her on St. John's Eve and then meeting in the turret room with this full-bodied, voluptuous woman—often, no doubt, when Jill was working with Kelsey.

"All right," Jill said. "Show me quickly, please."

Moira opened the door, let Jill enter. The automatic lock clicked. Jill caught her breath. What a lovely room! Glittering crystal chandeliers in graceful teardrop clusters, draperies and the canopied bed rich with old rose satin caught with gold loops, the gilt French provincial furniture. The mantel was carved in ivory, a wonderful frieze of Eurydice and Orpheus, showing them loving, then her dead by the serpent's sting, and him descending into Hades pleading with Persephone, Queen of the Dead, till the goddess let Eurydice go. That fatal backward glance, Eurydice's disappearance, bacchantes tearing Orpheus apart, his severed head floating down the river still singing his loved one's name.

And the window jutting out with a velvet window seat. A loom stood there, a half-worked hanging on it. Just so must Johnny's mother have left it when she decided not to observe life from her high window. What had she found with her Frenchman? How did Johnny find it possible to stay in this room?

Moira waved a hand toward built-in closets that ran the length of one wall, the dressing table with its ivory and

gold brush, mirror, and perfumes tray. "She didn't take her clothes or anything except her diamonds and best jewels. Mr. Regier never came here again, but he gave orders for Bascom to clean regularly." Moira studied a large oil painting that hung over a glossily polished writing desk. "Handsome woman, wasn't she?"

More, tremendously more, than that. The first Mrs. Regier, not quite smiling, was painted turning from her window with its cathedral arch and narrow panes. She wore a long white robe, and her dark hair fell below her hips. Vivian's gray eyes looked out in surprise, as if she had roused from a pleasant dream. Jill saw how Vivian would look in fifteen years, except that this woman had a tenderness, a fragility, that her daughter could not afford.

"She doesn't look like the woman to leave her child," Jill said.

"Does anyone?" asked Moira.

Bending, she felt along the fireplace beneath the ivory frieze till something clicked. Then she slid back what seemed to be the back of the fireplace, but instead were false bricks veneered on a sliding door. She slipped a small flashlight out of her pocket.

"Here we are! You go first."

"Where does it lead?"

"It goes down the inside of the wall, and at the bottom there's a door to the outside and another to the cellars. It was an escape way during the Revolution. The lord of that time saved his life by hiding here while Cromwell's men ransacked the place." Moira gave Jill a broad wink. "I imagine it's often had sweeter uses, miss! The Frenchman used to come this way, and it must be how his lady left without anyone seeing. Go on and I'll hold the torch so you can see where you're going."

"I know where the passageway is," Jill said. "No need to go down."

"But there is!" Moira insisted. "The lock to the outside is very complicated! What good is it to know the passage if you can't get out?"

The sooner she's satisfied, the sooner I can get away,

Jill thought. She bent and crept under the mantel. The light shone ahead of her, glanced along stone walls. Jill straightened, turned toward Moira. Just in time to see the panel close.

FIFTEEN

Stunned, Jill thought for a second it was a mistake, that Moira had inadvertently fingered the lock. Even after a locking click sounded, Jill fought the realization that was edging like cold paralysis up her spine.

"Moira! Moira, I don't like this joke!"

"Can't blame you," sounded Moira's voice, dim through the heavy panel. "I told you to go away."

"Are you crazy?" Jill knelt to tug and pry at the barrier. She only broke her nails.

"No use doing that, love," chided Moira. "No good to shout, either. No one can hear you."

"Johnny'll come! He'll help me!"

"Johnny's dead by now. Weighted, sunk deep in the bog."

Jill's heart seemed to stop. "Dead?" she cried. "Why? Did you—"

"He wouldn't stop poking around. He was out to prove his mother hadn't run away."

"Did she?"

Moira laughed softly. "No, love. You'll meet her. What's left of her is in there—with you!"

Stifling a scream, Jill peered about. There was only complete, pitch-heavy blackness. "You—you killed her?"

"Not I. I was in France. Me and another girl who's gone now swore that we saw Mrs. Regier and her lover. Sent Mr. Regier a telegram like it was from her, saying she was never coming back. Wayland shoved her into the hole. If the choloroform didn't kill her, lack of air soon did."

Wayland! Jill's mind reeled. She fought to hold on to her reason.

"But if this is a long passage—"

"It's not, dearie. Just a hidey-hole, all right for an hour or so, but deadly after the oxygen's sucked up."

"Why?" Jill shouted in revolt and disbelief. "Why?"

"Oh, there's a reason for each of you," Moira said. "Mrs. Regier had to go so the master could marry Branwen. Pregnant, Branwen was. By Regier. He offered to set her up in London or wherever she chose, provide well for her and the child. But Wayland swore no sister of his would be any man's mistress. A little quick, quiet work and Branwen was married and lady of Dragon's Mount."

"And a murdered woman was made to seem a deserting adulteress to her children!"

"That was hard, but what other way was there?"

What indeed and why not a few more murders to cover up the first one? "I suppose," groped Jill, "that Wayland wanted Johnny out of the way so that he'd be no threat to Branwen's claim on Dragon's Mount."

"The main thing was Johnny's hunting clues of his mother. And when Wayland saw that Elin still loved Johnny, he was so jealous I was certain he'd kill them both." Into Jill's sick, scarcely believing revulsion, Moira said, as if it was a relief to share what she knew, "That's right, Elin's fall wasn't an accident. Wayland let her drop, veered her in a way that panicked the bulls. The only thing that went wrong was that he didn't die too, the way he'd planned."

"Then why didn't he kill himself that night? And Johnny too? They were alone together."

"Elin's dying shook Wayland deep. He wasn't able to do anything for several days and then he—he—" A sly note of pride, coquetry, crept into Moira's voice. "He said to me, 'The sun's still bright, and I'm a strong man. Why should I die for a light piece who never had a mind for me once she set her heart on the young master?' And he swore he'd see Branwen safe always as mistress of the place."

"But—"

"Wayland thought Johnny would take you off, and once Paul didn't have you close to hanker after, Branwen could win him back, the way she always has. Wayland really

hoped you'd marry Johnny, settle it nice and neat, with no more killing. But when he mentioned such to Johnny a few days since, Johnny said he thought you loved his father or were anyway all amazed by him. That's when Wayland decided we couldn't risk waiting. 'A bad, nasty business and the sooner done, the better,' he told me."

Jill felt her brain whirling, spinning. Clenching her hands till the nails cut her palms, she tried to speak clearly, persuasively. "You love Kelsey, don't you, Moira?"

"Next in this world only to Wayland."

"And you know I've helped him. Doesn't that count for something?"

"I told you to go," Moira reminded crossly.

The woman was simply obsessed by her love. Jill felt more surely doomed than if a more wicked but less dominated woman controlled the locked panel. Still, someone *might* hear; the only chance at all was to delay Moira, keep her talking as long as possible.

"Did Paul Regier know about—about his wife?"

"Not he!" sneered Moira with the venom of a not-very-bright person for an intellectual. "Why, he doesn't even know about your little snuggery! It's been a secret in Wayland's family for over two hundred years, from the time a Regier dowager loved a strong young Smith, and they contrived the hideaway in case they were ever interrupted by her sons. You may be sure she never told her kin! But the secret was passed down in Wayland's folk, so every Smith has known the way to the bedroom of the great house's lady. Rare joke, isn't it, the Regiers so haughty and all?"

Jill sucked in a long breath, aware even as she did so that it diminished the amount of oxygen. "Moira. I'm not going to marry Paul. And I swear that if he keeps after me, I'll go away."

"Ah!" Moira's words were full of gratified justification. "So he *has* been at you already!"

"He's promised to leave me alone."

Moira scoffed. "Oh, he would—till you melted. No one ever resists him long, you've done better than most, poppet, I give you that! But you'd give in to him, soon or late, and Branwen would be sent packing. Wayland's sorry for

you, but you wouldn't go when you had the chance. Even after Branwen beheaded the Amazon, you wouldn't go. So now it's this."

It couldn't be happening! Jill fought the wild scream welling up in her throat. "But how will you explain what happened to me?" she demanded. "You can't say I ran off with a Frenchman!"

"No. You ran away with Johnny."

Stunned for a second, Jill rallied and managed a scornful laugh that she hoped might dent Moira's assurance. "That's ridiculous! We could marry if we wanted to! Why should we sneak off?"

"Because you've stolen heirloom jewelry—enough to keep you in luxury the rest of your lives. Wayland can swear that Johnny told him the jewels properly belonged to him, since Branwen would have the house and income till her death."

Cunning. Anyone who didn't know Johnny might believe it. Would his own father? Jill couldn't guess, but if there were no bodies and no trace, the lie might finally, reluctantly be accepted.

"Yes," went on Moira in a high shrill tone, "you've eloped with Johnny Regier. Only Wayland and I know that you'll spend your honeymoon apart—Johnny in the bog and you in this little hole!"

Johnny dead? Already dead? Jill couldn't, wouldn't believe it, as long as her will and mind could work. And she knew then that in spite of Paul's magnetic attraction for her, it was Johnny she loved. And if dying here in the black hole would have saved him, she would have struck that bargain. Bitter, bitter and strange, to know that now, when she couldn't tell him; he would die believing she wanted Paul.

A noise from outside roused Jill. "Wait!" she cried. "Wait, Moira! You can't—"

"I have to," the other woman answered. "Really, love, I am sorry, I liked you. At least you don't have to fret yourself about Kelsey. I'll carry on with what you were doing. Why don't you just lie down and make believe you're going to sleep?"

Lie down—make believe?

"Moira! Moira, please!"

"Wayland's going to marry me," Moira said proudly. "He promised that if I did this, he would. I've wanted him all my life. I'm sorry for you, but screeching won't help. And it won't take long, dear."

Footsteps, a muffled sound of the door shutting, a locking click. Then silence as deep as the blackness. Blackness where a murdered woman's bones must lie; and out beyond the beautiful glade of lilies the dead lady's son was hidden deep in the bog.

Giving way completely, Jill lost her awareness for a time, screaming till her brain was full of blinding red, screaming till her throat felt bloody, till her mind roused, recognized the frantic cries as her own, cries that ebbed into hopeless exhaustion.

Jill slumped against the panel, heart pounding, head throbbing. Horrible, more horrible than torture, to end like this, locked away where no one knew, no one would ever find her! She thought of her parents with an urgent longing she hadn't experienced in years; they would eventually hear Moira's lie. And even if they refused to credit it, what could they do? They might come over and hunt for her, hire detectives, but only Moira and Wayland knew of this place. Jill ached for her parents, who would have no living child.

Johnny? No one would find him, either.

If I hadn't been jealous of Elin . . . if I hadn't been fascinated by Paul . . . if Johnny and I had been together even only once in love, our finish like this wouldn't be quite so terrible, not quite such a waste!

Already the air was growing stale. Jill knew she must stop gulping it in, must control herself. If she had the slightest, flickering chance, it was in conserving the air, finding some way out.

If she had to die, better in trying, even futilely, to defy the murderers. Methodically beginning by the panels, she ran her fingers along the stones, up and down, down and up, searching every inch for a flaw or opening, working her way painstakingly around the small enclosure, a place

built, ironically enough, to shelter lovers, provide a haven for their joy.

Jill's foot struck something. She clamped her teeth to keep from screaming again. Shuddering, sure of what the obstacle was, she knelt to touch disintegrating material, bones.

Johnny and Vivian's mother. Poor, poor lady! Such a death, unexpected, undeserved; shame on her memory, with her small daughter growing up just down the corridor, convinced that her mother had deserted her, armoring her childish heart against that pain with a wall of ice.

Jill thought grievingly that if Vivian could know the truth about her mother, then her own death wouldn't be quite so pointless. Though it would hurt the girl to know her mother had gone like this . . .

Like this, the way Jill knew she was dying. Terror swirled in dark mists through her, but she battled it, forcing calm. If she died, Vivian would never know her mother was innocent; Wayland and Moira would have killed with impunity, might perhaps do so again if Branwen's supremacy were challenged.

"I'm sorry," Jill murmured, choking, to the bones. "So terribly sorry. But your son never believed what they said about you. He—he came back to prove them wrong. Somehow, wherever you are now, I hope you know that."

The damp chill of the musty cell pierced Jill; she began to shiver in a way no amount of will power could stop. Compelling herself not to think of Mrs. Regier's last hours, Jill groped on, her numbing hands trying to discover a crack, some sharp tool, a concealed lever, anything.

She was back at the panel.

There was nothing. She must die.

Mercifully it was seeming less important. She was growing dizzy, breathing the used air in shallow gasps. But the truth—the truth about herself and Vivian's mother, the truth about the murderers who might kill again—that was important, that did matter.

A message, her dizzy brain insisted. *A message . . .*

There was just the thinnest pencil line of glow beneath

the panel. If she had paper, she could probably thrust it underneath. But she had none. Her brain struggled like a swimmer tossed up and down in battering waves.

Cloth? She tried to rip her skirt, but it was strong material, she was too weak. Then she remembered Mrs. Regier's rotted dress. Leaning forward, flinching at the cold feel of some part of the skeleton, Jill tugged and had in her shaking hand a bit of what felt like taffeta.

If it would only fit under the panel!

It resisted her fumbling efforts, but at last she got an edge beneath. The rest followed. Maybe, just maybe, someone would find it before Moira did. Someone might even recognize the material, maybe Mrs. Bascom or Paul.

Jill had done what she could. Now she could give in to fear, it didn't matter. She beat at the panel.

"Johnny!" she cried. She knew he was dead, but it was his name she needed to call. "Johnny!"

Vivian would soon be going to her room. No one would be there. *Vivian! Johnny! I know where your mother is! But it's too late—*

Too late, too late—

Forced up to light and air from the bottom of a deep, dark well of crushing, heavy liquid, Jill blinked, groaned, winced as her eyes opened. Fierce, blinding pain sledged inside her skull. Her lungs ached.

How, why, was there enough air left to permit this, make her go through more useless agony? She wanted to sink back into that heavy, peaceful sleep.

Someone wouldn't let her. Someone gripped her hands. Someone kissed her. And even in this state she knew that mouth. The only one she wanted.

Her eyes flew open again. Johnny! She was on his mother's bed, and he was sitting by her. He raised her, made her sip from a glass of brandy that a hovering Mrs. Bascom offered.

Jill swallowed, spluttered at the strong taste. "You—you're supposed to be dead!" she told Johnny as waves of light and dark exploded in her head.

"So are you," said Johnny. "But Wayland's plan went wrong. He's the one who's dead."

Vivian floated into Jill's line of clearing vision, launched herself into Jill's arms with a tremendous hug. "You're all right!" the child fairly shrieked. "You won't die! I—I was so afraid. That awful Moira!"

"Here, here," scolded Mrs. Bascom. "Don't fidget Miss Jill about, Vivian! Come and help me make her some tea."

The child eyed Johnny doubtfully. "You'll look after Jill?"

"I promise," vowed Johnny.

When the door closed on Mrs. Bascom and Vivian, Johnny held Jill's hands in his warm, strong ones and told her what had happened. He had eaten dinner with Wayland, but when Johnny started to step outside, Wayland had clubbed him from behind and was dragging him toward the bog when Johnny revived.

"I waited till he stopped to rest a minute," Johnny said. "Then I used a few of the tricks we learn overseas for getting out of tight places. When Wayland bent for me, I kicked him under the chin. Broke his neck. I called the police, and though I didn't know what was going on over here, I phoned Dragon's Mount and asked for you, warned Mrs. Bascom not to tell Moira anything, because I knew the woman was sweet on Wayland and might be involved somehow—though I never dreamed of what she'd done to you! So Mrs. Bascom and Vivian went on a search while I had to answer police questions. The constable drove over here with me, and just before we arrived, Mrs. Bascom and Vivian looked in this room. Vivian saw that scrap of cloth sticking out from under the panel. They were trying to pry it open when the constable and I came in and finished the job." He eyed her sternly. "Not a bit too soon, either!"

So that last despairing effort had saved her life! Jill trembled, remembering the horror, remembering the secret.

"Johnny, your mother—do you know?"

He nodded, mouth tightening. "We found her when we brought you out. I remember that dress—all rusty and gleaming, it was." He was silent, then lifted his head. "At least her name can shine again."

"Does Vivian know?"

"Not yet. When we saw what was behind you, we shut the panel. When you feel like moving to your own room, the police will take charge in here."

"Moira?"

"She heard us at the panel, came to investigate. When she saw me, she let out a scream and bolted. But the constable got her. When she knew Wayland was dead, she just collapsed, babbled everything. The constable's taking her in for charging as soon as the police he requested turn up."

Jill closed her eyes, trying to absorb it all, believe that it was over, Johnny was alive, and so was she, while the old mystery of his mother's disappearance was solved, her name cleared, proof found that she had not deserted her family.

"Did Branwen know?" Jill wondered.

"Wayland never told her how he'd cleared her way, so Moira says. When Branwen learned, she had to be placed under sedation. A nurse is with her. Poor woman, she doesn't have much to wake up to!" As if guessing Jill's next question, Johnny said gruffly, "The doctor telephoned Dad's club, left a message."

"It—it'll be a terrible shock for him," Jill murmured.

"So it will," said Johnny, without any noticeable compassion. "He'll have to see how wrong he was about my mother. But I suppose you feel sorry for him, don't you?"

"Of course!" Sitting up angrily, Jill tried to pull her hands free. "He is human! He can feel deserted and hurt and wounded, just like any man, so I hope you're not going to put him on trial now, try to make him feel guilty because he was fooled by plausible testimony from Moira and another woman!"

"Dad will hold his own trial," Johnny said. "He's his own worst punishment." His carefully controlled expres-

sion changed, and Johnny brought Jill forward. "I didn't mean to ask till you were over the effects of being buried alive, but one question will settle everything for me."

Jill could scarcely breathe. Momentarily she was angry at Johnny, but his gaze went into her, reached her depths, shook her. "What question?" she managed.

"What are your intentions toward Dad? Honorable or—"

"I don't know what honorable would be in this case," Jill said. "After all, he's married."

"You know damned well what I mean! Do you love him? Will he be your man?"

No more evading. Jill looked at Johnny straight, and her whole being warmed with joy. "Please, Johnny, you be my man; it's you I love."

They never knew when Mrs. Bascom came in with the tea.

When Paul returned from London, he looked haggard, sick, almost old. Branwen was in the hospital under sedation. After the police investigation into her death Paul's first wife was interred in the Regier vault in the village churchyard after a simple memorial service. Paul sat in a pew by himself. Vivian, very intent but dry-eyed, was between Johnny and Jill. Mrs. Bascom snuffled behind them. And so a vanished, dishonored lady was given her due and put to rest in her rightful tomb.

It couldn't atone for her frightful death, but it changed things for those she had loved, especially the daughter who had felt abandoned.

That night, after Jill had brushed her hair, Vivian suddenly crumpled and wept in Jill's arms. Jill simply held her and let her exhaust the violence, the loss and hurt and anger.

"I—I'm so glad my mother didn't run away, Jill. I'm glad she didn't want to leave me! But it's awful—horrid—the way she died. When I think about it, I just can't stand it!"

More sobbing and the child calmed a little; Jill sought for words, true ones with some help. "Your mother loved you, dear. She looks happy and serene in her portrait. I think she must have been happy till the very last. That was dreadful, but it didn't last long, you know. Only a few hours out of her whole life."

Vivian pondered. "Mrs. Bascom says that she was as kind as she was beautiful."

"Then she was happy, love."

Vivian sat up, her face, for a brief flash, an echo of the one in the portrait hung in the turret room. "Yes. She was beautiful and kind and happy. The way she looks in her picture. That," decided the girl firmly, "is how I'll remember her."

Absorbing and finding a way to accept the truth about her mother seemed to have dissolved most of Vivian's prickly armor. She was tolerant with her father when they met and spent hours playing with Kelsey.

"He hasn't a mother for a while," she explained to Jill. "And, of course, he must miss that mean old Moira because she was good to *him*. So we've got to be extra nice to him, don't we?"

The day after the memorial service Paul sent for Jill. Somehow the study with its globes and books and dragon fireplace seemed different. Then Jill realized that the difference was in Paul, though he rose with his usual courtesy and waited till she was sitting across from him.

He didn't look as craggy as he had right after he got back from London, but there was a weary cast to his features that touched Jill. "How are you?" she asked, before he could state the reason for her summons. "I—I hope you're resting well."

"Well enough," he said abruptly, dismissing such personal inquiries. His curtness reassured Jill. Shaken he certainly was, but his back wasn't broken, his head wasn't bent. He could take whatever happened. His smile was stiff, as if unused muscles twinged. "You seem recovered.

I very much appreciate your getting Vivian over the hump. I didn't know what on earth to say to her." His mouth quirked, more easily this time. "When I finally contrived to mumble something this morning, she wound up counseling me!"

Jill laughed. "She does have a maternal streak. And I do think she's all right about her mother; surely anything's an improvement on feeling deserted—" She bit her lip. "I—I wasn't thinking. I'm sorry."

"No need." His tone was brusque. "My first wife would have had fair reason to leave me. And now my second is."

Stiffening, Jill gasped, "What?"

"Branwen is absolutely shattered at knowing how she became mistress here. She says she never wants to come here again. At the moment she doesn't want to see me, either." Paul hesitated. His dark eyes probed Jill, and for a second she felt a stirring of that electric interest, that almost hypnotic magnetism he had possessed for her. But it was electric, it was hypnotic, powered by his will, not by hers. She loved Johnny. And so she stared back at Paul, and the moment passed, the blaze died, though Paul went on doggedly in a way she had to admire.

"Jill, hear me out. Branwen is going on a long cruise. When she's calmer, we'll decide what we want to do. We have no love now, but we are—survivors. That's a kind of bond. However, we have agreed we are not bound to each other."

With a suffocated feeling Jill knew what was coming, wished she could prevent it, but knew his nature demanded a clear answer. "I love you, Jill." Paul watched her steadily. "I'm scarred and old, you have much more to give me that I can offer you. But I wouldn't be honest if I didn't offer."

Strangely, in that moment of refusal she felt more deeply for him than she ever had. "Paul," she said, wishing her voice wouldn't tremble. "I am honored that—that you care about me. But I love Johnny."

Only rigid muscles in his jaw showed that he felt anything. He bowed his head formally, rose. "Then let me say

I wish you joy. And I envy my son as I have never envied any human."

Over coffee that evening Paul said casually to Johnny, "What are your plans now?"

Johnny shot Jill a questioning glance. They hadn't talked intimately since that day of rescue in the turret room. Johnny didn't yet know about Paul's interview with Jill, because he had been off on business all day and came late to dinner.

"I'm not sure, Dad. There are plenty of foreign jobs, of course, but I haven't really talked it over yet with my company."

"Well, doesn't your blessed organization build some bridges in England?" demanded Paul.

"Yes, sir. In fact, I've been asked about this project in Wales—"

"So living in England is a possibility?"

"Of course, but—" Again, Johnny looked toward Jill.

"I know," Paul said drily. "And I congratulate you, John. Perhaps I should really be putting some questions to you both. But first some background. Branwen's going on a long voyage, alone. We may or may not get back together, but now she would never live at Dragon's Mount, and I've lost my wish to do so. I'm moving to my London club next week, and though I shall come back for the odd day or so, I need a resident laird of the castle." His gaze traveled slowly to Jill, and he smiled at her without a trace of grudge or hauteur. "Vivian and Kelsey need a mother. I heartily wish you'd take that job, my dear." He gave his words time to sink in, then summed his proposition up.

"You'll be my heir, Johnny. There's no reason why you can't operate out of Dragon's Mount, no reason why Jill can't supervise a residential home here for youngsters like Kelsey. The place is cursed for me now, I don't think I'll ever want to live here again. But if I did, there's plenty of room to put up a house on the other side of the forest. I solemnly swear if you take on the place and its responsibilities, I'll not meddle. What do you say?"

Jill looked to Johnny. He looked to her. "What do *you* say?" he asked.

A home for children? Staying with Kelsey and Vivian? Living with her love? Jill couldn't speak. She nodded, putting her hand in Johnny's, and the way he smiled at her was a pledge even stronger than the emphatic one he made to his father.

"We say yes."

"Good!" Paul set his hand over theirs, and the covenant was made.

SILVER WOOD

Deirdre Rowan

A house like this, with its haunted past and strange seductive beauty, might ensnare her, change her till she could never go home . . .

Young and lovely Lynette Heath had come to Belleforest to teach music to Dame Isolde's illegitimate grandson. He was said to be the son of Amlyth, Dame Isolde's absent son. And when Amlyth returned to Belleforest, shortly after Lynette's arrival, a sudden, fierce attraction developed between them. Things only started to go wrong when Amlyth's father was killed in a mysterious fall – an accident which the police believed to be murder.

Belleforest was alive with rumours. In the growing atmosphere of terror people were even beginning to suspect Lyn. They said she would do anything to help Amlyth.

And perhaps she would.

CORONET BOOKS

DARK MASQUERADE

Patricia Maxwell

Death lurked in the shadows amidst the magnificence of Oak Shade.

Her sister's sudden death left Elizabeth in sole charge of her little nephew Joseph. Wanting to stay with the baby and watch over him, Elizabeth assumed her sister's identity and took Joseph to live with his Louisiana relatives, the wealthy Delacroix family.

But before long Elizabeth's cool-headedness began to desert her. For in the oppressive atmosphere of the Delacroix mansion, her dark masquerade turned into a flirtation with death. An unseen threat stalked the corridors of Oak Shade: some unknown person wanted herself and Joseph out of the way. Trapped by her pretence, Elizabeth didn't know whether the danger was to her – or to the person she was pretending to be. And there was no-one she could turn to for help . . .

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SILVERHILL

Phyllis Whitney

Malinda was eager and unsuspecting . . .

When Malinda Rice first came to Silverhill, her grandmother's home of gloom, she found herself caught inextricably in the past history of her tainted family.

The longer she stayed, the more she felt herself a prisoner, kept from discovering the old secrets of the house.

Why, for instance, has her poor half-demented aunt, Arvilla, been branded a murderer for the past forty years?

Why does her grandmother try so hard to keep all the family skeletons hidden in the cupboard?

Before she discovered the full, horrifying truth about the past evil and the present terrors of Silverhill, Malinda found herself fighting hard to save both her sanity and her life.

CORONET BOOKS

THE WHITE WITCH

Elizabeth Goudge

Little Jenny spent her childhood in a quiet Oxfordshire village, a place to live happily and die peacefully. In other times she would have lived out her life surrounded by family and friends, the mistress of some comfortable manor house.

But this was the time of the English Civil War and the bitter conflict disrupted even this haven of family love. For Jenny's father was a staunch follower of John Hampden, a soldier on the Parliamentarian side. But Francis, the man she grew to love, fought for the King.

CORONET BOOKS

STRANGERS IN COMPANY

Jane Aiken Hodge

A holiday coach tour – or a Greek Nightmare?

Marian and Stella were strangers when they met at the airport, ready to depart for Athens and their Mercury bus tour of Greece. Marian, plagued by bitter memories from the past, was nominally in charge of her young companion.

But this was no ordinary bus tour and their fellow travellers no ordinary holidaymakers. Haunted by death and danger, the two of them see their travelling companions struck down one by one, until at last it becomes a mere struggle for survival. But as the tension mounts against the ever-changing background of classical Greece, Marian and Stella become strangers no longer, but unite to face the dangerous nightmare of the world around them.

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"You can't do any good here. Better for you and all of us if you go away. Go while you can!"

Jill Underwood had come from America all the way to Dragon's Mount, the Regiers' huge old house near Stonehenge. They were an ancient family and many dark tales from the past were told about them. But Jill tried not to listen. The family's private affairs were none of her business – all she had to do was to look after her young charge, Kelsey Regier.

But then frightening things began to happen at Dragon's Mount . . . the slashed toys, the beheaded doll, the mysterious references to Paul Regier's runaway first wife. It was then that Jill stumbled upon the dreadful secret of the hidden passage – and suddenly her own life was in terrible danger.

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